Alvin Greenberg • Peter Chilson • Maxine Chernoff

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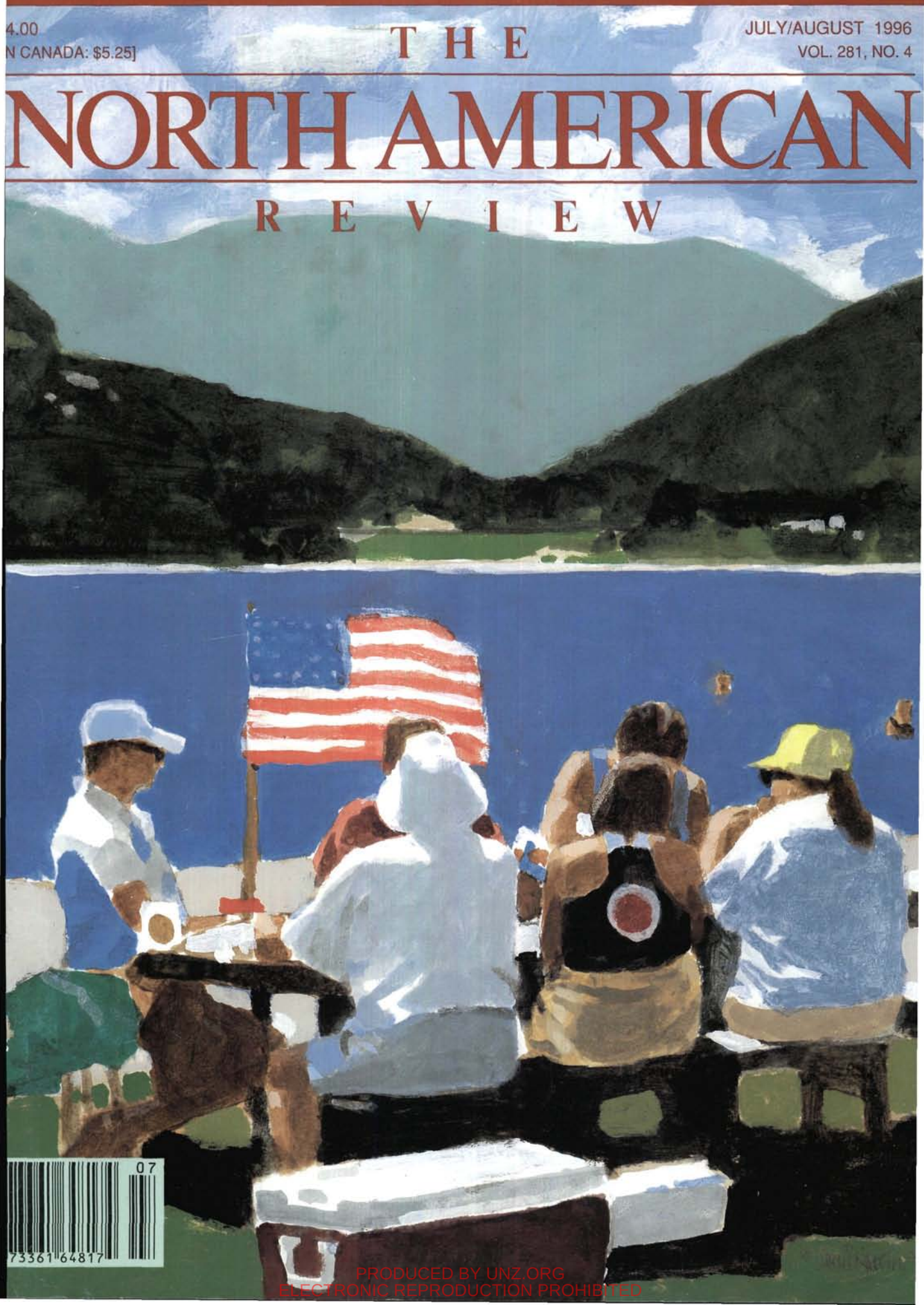

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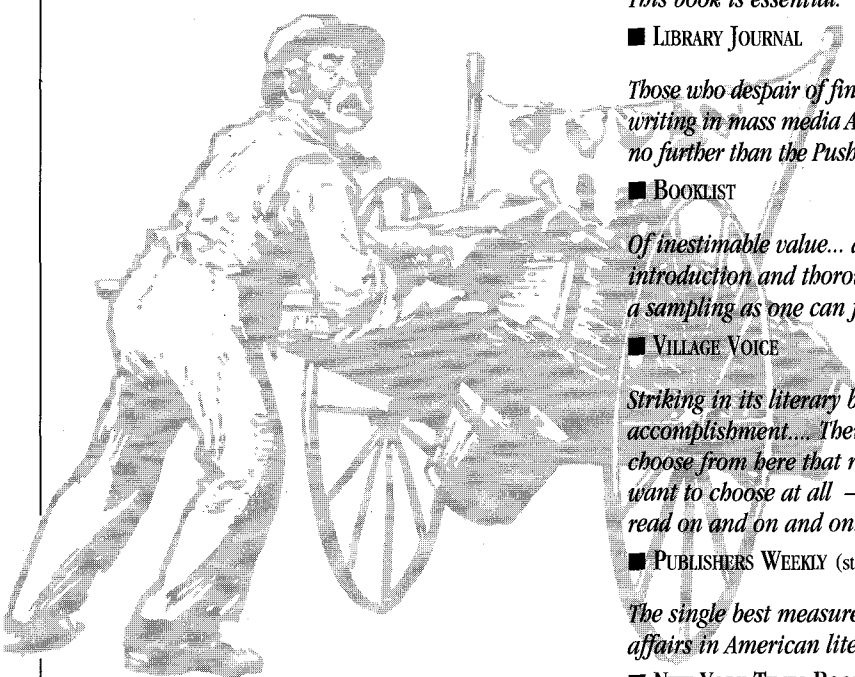

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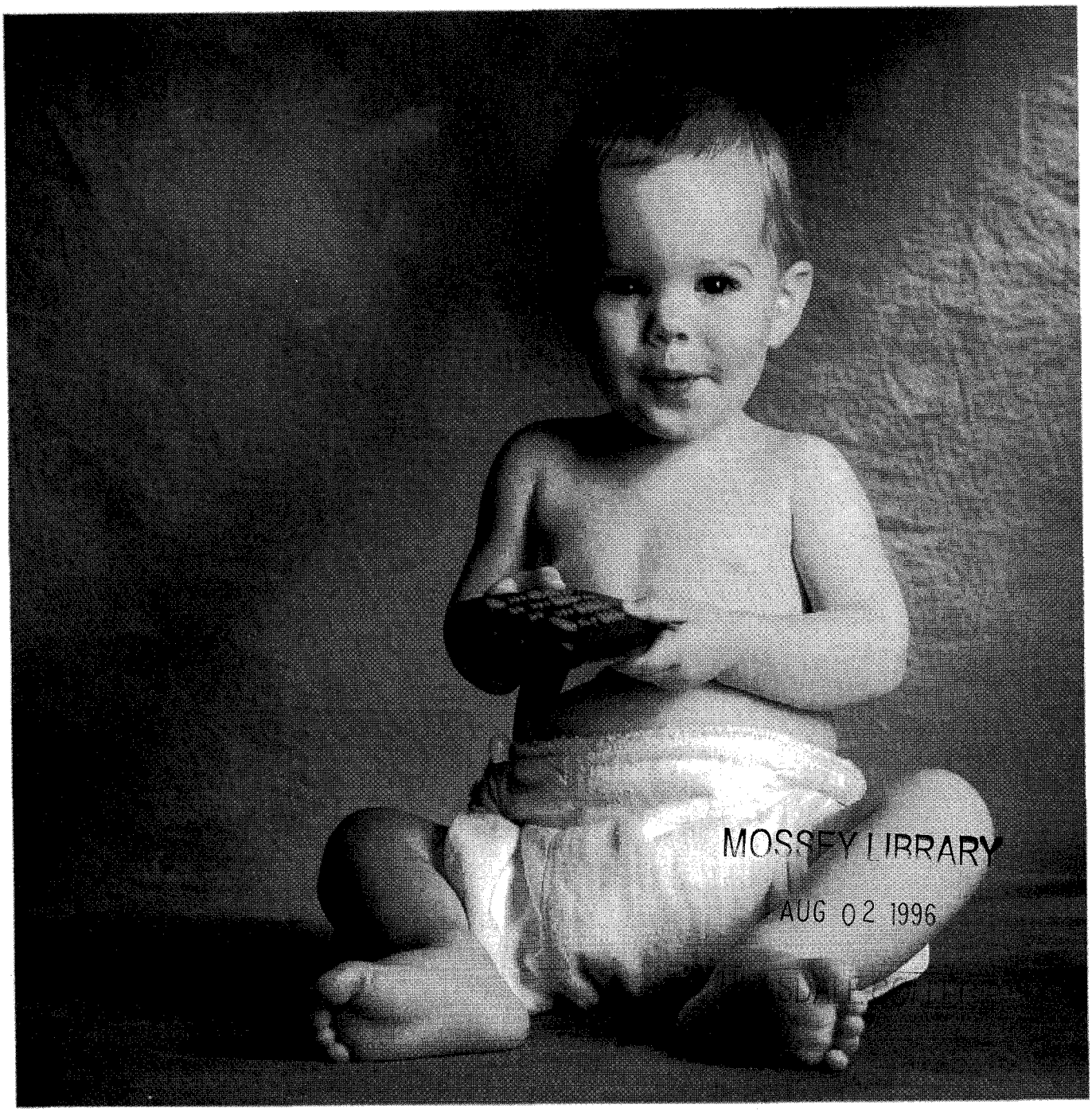

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

■

Sweltering? Readers must remember that one of the many advantages of an old-fashioned magazine (what one calls in this computer age "hard copy") is its utility as a fan. Our advice for the rest of this hot summer is to wave the NAR before your brow, letting the breezes cool you and the passing words delight you. For this activity, we offer a clutch of short-short stories, each readable in a single sweep of the magazine before your eyes. For more leisurely moments, we recommend longer views of theater, high-technology and post-adolescence, and a remarkable episode from the history of French Africa.

Of note: Florence Williams's "Polygamy in America" (March/April 1995) is the winner in the "First Person Essay" category of this year's American Society of Journalists and Authors awards; Trudy Dittmar's "Cows, Nature, the Arrogance of Things" (January /February 1995) has been selected for inclusion in the *1997 Pushcart Prize Awards* anthology, to be published later this year.

A reminder: With the first issue of 1997, the cover price of the NAR will rise to $4.95, and the annual subscription rate will rise to $22. We regret the increase, but we will have held the line for six years against climbing paper, printing, and postal costs, and something—or someone—had to give. We believe the magazine is worth its new price and trust our readers will agree. We will accept new and renewal subscriptions at the old $18 rate until September 1st.

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THE
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Listening to Mariko:

Madness and Decay on an African Road

PETER CHILSON

LIEUTENANT COLONEL Jean François Klobb's last journal entries betray exhaustion, disgust, as if he could not come to terms with what he was seeing. He had been pushing fifty men east across the West African Sahel for six weeks, day and night. On July 11, 1899, in Koran-Kalgo, a village in southern Niger, he wrote, "Arrived in burned village full of corpses. Two little girls hung from a branch. The odor was infectious...Well water is poisoned by bodies."

Lieutenant Octave Meynier, Klobb's adjutant, kept a slightly more specific and emotional record of Koran-Kalgo. "A single look to the bottom of these wells is enough for me. Vague forms, tangled over each other..."

The precise words seemed beyond both men.

They stood on the freshly plotted course of an African highway, marked by the detritus of La Mission Afrique Centrale—the object of Klobb's hunt. Eight French officers and 450 African conscripts assigned, "in the name of science and civilization," to survey and claim the central Sudan to Lake Chad for France, which had already taken much of Africa west of the Niger River. The Central African Mission, led by 32-year-old Captain Paul Voulet, marched from Bamako (now the capital of Mali) in November 1898. In December, along the Niger River, the expedition, paranoid and short of supplies, began to crumble.

NIGER'S PRINCIPAL national highway, Route Nationale One, is historically rooted in greed and madness. In the first seven months of 1899, Captain Voulet's expedition marched, murdered, pillaged and nearly disintegrated on or within a few miles of what would be Route One (construction began in 1900). This road—roads all over Africa—remains haunted by men in uniform, and by blood. Redundant checkpoints, appalling auto accidents.

Some facts: 25,000 passenger cars serve Niger's eight million people on 5,000 miles of roadway; 4,000 people are injured annually in accidents. More than 400 die, a rate ten times higher, proportionately, than in the West. Route One absorbs half the carnage. The road runs a thousand miles west to east, underlining the country from the border with Mali, south along the Niger River, and then east to Lake Chad along Niger's southern rim. A living monument, evolved from colonial ambition.

Klobb, ordered to relieve Voulet, began his quest in May. Facts survive in the Klobb and Meynier journals, published together under the title, *A la recherche de Voulet*, in Paris in 1931. Dozens of burned villages; piles of decapitated corpses, heads strewn about; thirteen women dangling from limbs in a stand of baobab trees. Voulet shot soldiers who wasted ammunition. Between villages, Klobb's force followed a trail of bodies. Stragglers reported that porters pressed into service from villages were bayoneted when they became useless. Thousands of lives. And if the journals reveal anything of value, it is the integrity of witness, a progressive numbness, as though overwhelmed by something both men were desperate to explain but could not. At one village, Klobb wrote, "Village burned by Voulet."

What astounded the colonel, strict Catholic and distinguished officer, more than the destruction, was the depth of brutality—at the hands of Frenchmen! It is difficult to imagine what Klobb witnessed along a 600-mile path that began, for him, along the Niger River in what is now western Niger. His task became an obsession evident in the increasing coldness of his journal entries. The atrocities humiliated him, challenged his identity, the honor of France—which is to say, the honor of Klobb, educated to be an engineer, to be logical and loyal. A man of 41, bespectacled, thin, with a long mustache that matched his physique, he lived by military tradition and law. "It pains me to think," he wrote on June 11, "what officers could command such horror."

By July, his entries had become lists, stripped of adjectives.

KELETIGUI MARIKO, standing beside his Land Rover, shakes his head. He reaches for his cane and a water bottle behind the car's front seat and takes a sip. Then he says, "I warn him and warn him, but he drives too fast." I smile weakly to empathize, but Mariko glares at me, as if I've betrayed him. He shakes a finger. "One day he'll kill us."

Sand skids south across Route One and tugs at my trouser cuffs, as if asking me to follow. The sound mimics car tires on a wet street, and all around the ground looks fuzzy under 30-mile-an-hour winds. This road, Niger's super highway, is six meters wide, a layered asphalt-crushed-stone-concrete melange, like the vertebrae of a prehistoric

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beast revealed by slow scouring of wind and sand. Nature's bulldozing.

Mariko is angry. The anger sizzles softly, perpetually. We have been traveling since dawn, east from the city of Zinder, enduring army checkpoints every 25 kilometers. At nine a.m. we have stopped near a village to find water for the vehicle's ailing radiator, and Mariko, who is scouting new reforestation projects, is frustrated with lethargic soldiers (*Ils mangent ce pays*, he says) and now with his driver, who, like most drivers in Africa, worships speed.

The fact is, while Mariko is angry, I am shaken.

Twenty minutes before, motoring at 80 miles an hour, we observed this: small figures far ahead, frantically flinging sand on the road. Closing in, we saw six children, including a girl in a green head cloth and wrap, scooping sand into potholes with their hands. They leaped in the road, laughing, waving, jumping about. The driver never slowed. He smiled, lowered the window and drew from his breast pocket a handful of yellow coins—five-, ten-, twenty-five-franc pieces— that he flung out the window as we passed, forcing a boy to leap out of our way. Over my shoulder, I watched the coins bounce and glitter in hazy sun. The children dove for them, kicking, swinging at each other, getting up and diving again.

A tiny profit from the road. The driver chuckled. I winced. Mariko bowed his head.

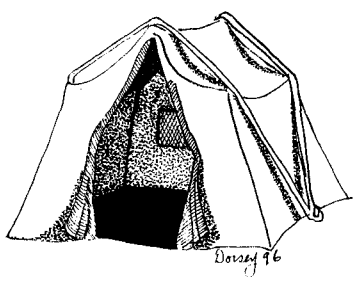
MARIKO IS A LINK between the road and its past.

You begin with "Keletigui," a word in Bambara (language of Mali) which means "master of war." It is the name of his father, who came from Mali. Mariko is 74, born in Zinder (southeastern Niger), a city his father first entered wearing the uniform of an African *tirailleur*—blue tunic, baggy red pantaloons. Sergeant Keletigui accompanied Klobb on the hunt for Voulet. He married and retired a pensioner, due the respect of one who landed on the right side of colonial conflicts. His son, Mariko, studied in colonial schools, trained as a veterinarian in Dakar, Senegal, French West Africa's administrative capital, and entered the colonial veterinary service in 1946. He worked across French Sudan—Mali, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Niger, and later for his country's government. He learned six languages walking the bush with farmers, herdsmen, hunters, training to be a warrior in an environmental struggle.

You find the link in his writing, like this poem fragment (translated from the French):

> Like the nomad, I dream of an Africa
> without frontiers,
> Of a united Africa liberated from
> police harassment
> And formalities imported from
> another continent.

He has published poems, a novel, three natural history books, dozens of articles, and a memoir still read in Niger's secondary schools. While treating cattle diseases, advising farmers on goat feed, trapping poisonous snakes—a means to support passionate curiosity—Mariko studied rural life, spiritual hunting rituals, the stratigraphy and chemistry of the land. He explored what he calls in his memoir, *Souvenirs de la boucle du Niger*, "a martyr region," the Sahel, a place of environmental decay. Centuries of overgrazing, cutting trees for crop land—encouraged by tradition and policy—exacerbated a drought that has never fully lifted.



In 1981 Mariko co-founded the aid agency SOS Sahel International, for which he travels by foot and Land Rover talking about gardens and trees. Spend enough time on the roads, he says, and you can sense how things are by the number of checkpoints and the soldiers' moods; by the state of the landscape and how much of the road disappears under shifting sands.

On his feet, Mariko seems to glide, legs concealed beneath a long cotton robe, gray for the field and white for the office, as he plants his cane deliberately step for step. A strong and trim man with thin, gray hair. The cane is like chalk, used to point and make diagrams in the sand. He is "West Africa's senior veterinarian." His words. He'll also tell you: *Je suis geologue, paleontologue, anthropologue.* He won't talk politics, though contempt for government surfaces through carefully enunciated French. "Ministers call grand meetings on reforestation, but do nothing!" The last word pops. It hangs in the air like a puff of smoke.

His policy critiques appear in newspapers and journals in Africa and France. In 1978 Niger's ruler, General Seyni Kountche, threw him in jail. "Kountche called me in to discuss agriculture. I told him my views are known. I sign everything I write and stand by it. He freed me after five days." The government continued harassing him, challenging his citizenship, summoning him to explain articles, until Kountche died in 1987. In the 1980s, Mariko accused Mali of abusing the human rights of Tuareg nomads. His articles were banned there until the government fell in 1991.

I'VE DECIDED, awaiting Mariko and the driver, to walk a bit on this road that seems so timid, fraying badly at the edges and rutted in places, like a country road in southern Idaho. An hour may go by before a car passes. Route One is a relic of colonial lust, a road like many the Europeans built in Africa, designed to lead out more than lead in. My government map of Niger shows that Route One's center collapses south—to the coast—in a giant V near the border with Benin (600 miles west of where I stand), where another road goes to the rail head 190 miles across the frontier at Parakou. The rail line, built in the 1920s, connects the interior to the Cotonou seaport, a suction system

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for cotton, palm oil, grain, labor, military conscripts. The French feared the project wouldn't pay and never finished it. The train still runs between Cotonou and Parakou under a name that preserves hope: Organisation Commune Benin-Niger. Likewise, Route One is an odd presence on the land. Perhaps it is the road's persistent narrowness and silence, a road that has the character of something the French failed to pack up when they left.

History tends to ambush here. In 1986, in a village market one morning, a woman grabbed her young son by the shoulders and pointed at me. *Tu vois, tu vois*, she said, *c'est le capitaine Voulet*. She laughed as the boy struggled. He looked at me wide-eyed, kicking and screaming. When I told a Nigerien friend about it, he smiled. "When I was bad," he explained, "my mother told me Captain Voulet would come and eat me. She never said who Voulet was, just that he would eat me."

School teachers in Niger talk about *l'histoire de Voulet-Chanoine*, after the commander and his adjutant, Captain Charles Chanoine. I learned the story from a student in Bouza, a southern village where I was a Peace Corps English teacher and where the woman called me *le capitaine Voulet*. Just the appearance of a car in Bouza was a notable event. I imagined the spectacle of a European military column passing a few miles south 87 years earlier, close to where Route One is now.

By 1899, a patchwork of European powers controlled much of Africa's coast. The French were moving across the continent on a wave of humiliation born of defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. National honor had to be restored. The British, moreover, had ceded the Sahara to France and laughed, boasting of having surrendered only sand. France, as if to prove its virility, annexed parts of North, West, and Central Africa.

In the summer of 1899, three French expeditions were closing on Lake Chad (from the south, the north, and Voulet's from the west) to secure Central Africa and the mineral wealth they hoped to find. It was a transitional time. Ten years had passed since the U.S. Army had crushed the last serious Native American resistance. The Greco-Turkish and Spanish-American wars had recently ended. European and American engineers were competing to develop automobile technology.

The Central African Mission story stayed with me, preserved in my maps of Niger. Route One dominates the transport geography, a determined red line that looks more like a battered spine than an artery. The road crosses a vast, flat terrain stripped by people and nature—the hand of agriculture, the rub of wind and water.

Palm, acacia, baobab forests have disintegrated. Good soil, vulnerable without grassy cover, surrenders to wind. Some baobabs stand with roots exposed, the innards of an eroding ecology, grotesque and apocalyptic, elevated a few feet above the earth that once buried them. Wildlife, the most visually remarkable—giraffes, elephants, for instance—are largely gone on a plain marked by blobs of volcanic rock, sandstone, laterite. Underskin laid open, raw and hot, like second-degree burns.

Klobb and Voulet encountered a much greener savanna peppered by trees and the animal herds. Hyenas followed Voulet's column, preying on stragglers. Yet it was still a land of extreme heat, wind, punctuated by summer monsoons. Three months of rain that both nurtured crops and washed them away with swift violence. The Sahara to the north often cloaked the land and the French officers in dust.

A DOOR SLAMS behind me. I walk back to the Land Rover, where Mariko is waiting beside the car, his wooden cane hooked over his wrist. He throws glances at me and then delivers an awkward declaration, a sort of non-sequitur apology for his anger this morning when complaining about his driver: "If there are people who say I'm indefatigable, it's because they know that despite my age, even when I'm one hundred and fifteen, I'll still be out here doing this." He pounds his sandaled feet to emphasize walking, contact with the land, and gets in the car. The driver and I follow. We are back on the road.

Extension officials Mariko meets while hiking to project sites, struggle to keep pace. They call him *le docteur*. As Mariko walks, he lectures on science and history. He begins with *Mon père m'a dit que...* For example, "My father told me this area was lush and green and the people strong and healthy." Or, "I first came here in 1940..." Sometimes he talks of Klobb, "*un officier integre*...who tried to stop the madness" Mariko owns copies of the Klobb-Meynier journals. "I visited every old book seller in Paris to find a copy."

Pieces of the Central African Mission's story decay in government archives in the capital, Niamey, and around Niger. In Zinder, a tiny building behind the provincial governor's office houses tens of thousands of pages: colonial reports on politics, religion, botany, geology, agriculture, and military matters dating from 1899 until independence in 1960. A broad three-foot high mound on the floor. The material gathers dust, termites, and scorpions, yellow scorpions that scurry out when you pick up a book or piece of paper.

And Mariko, the eye-witness, works his memory as we drive. "I don't like questions in the car," he tells me. "Just let me talk." After a while, he says: "When I was four [in 1924], my parents began sending me to visit relatives in Kournawa [60 miles west of Zinder on the road]. French officers would come with soldiers to collect people for labor battalions...They would

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walk through the village with the chief— I remember this—calling people from their homes. Men, women, older children, boys, girls, it didn't matter...Most worked the road. They carried laterite. They ground it up to repair rough sections, or parts the rains had washed out. Many died. Many didn't get enough food or water. They beat them, too. But my father had been a soldier, so I never had to go." He stops there.

I read the Klobb-Meynier journals, too, Mariko's copy, spending afternoons with my notebooks, maps and the book spread on a table in his office. The room is stuffed with bookshelves, wall maps of West Africa and Niger. He owns rare editions of early European scientific studies of Africa, including the reports of the Tilho Mission, a French team of geologists, anthropologists and botanists who crossed Niger by camel in 1906, traveling along the Niger River just as Route One does, and then east. The office's every flat surface supports fossils, books, paper, scattered jars containing insect specimens, and snakes preserved in formaldehyde —vipers and cobras Mariko trapped himself. It bothered me, I finally told him, how closely the national highway follows Captain Voulet's route, west to east. He smiled. "Yes, you'll find the road connects many things in our past."

THE ONLY PICTURES I know of Lieutenant Colonel Klobb and Captain Voulet are two drawings printed in text books used in Niger's secondary schools and in the book, *Le Grand Capitaine*, by the French journalist Jacques-Francis Rolland. Klobb, a military martinet in a pince-nez and long waxed gray mustache, stands in a marine artillery officer's dress uniform before a lace-covered table, gloved left hand atop his sword. Voulet, on the other hand, wears four decorations across his chest, his chin raised under a close-cut black mustache. There is tradition and order in the first drawing, and blunt ambition in the face of the second.

From December to March, before Klobb's hunt began, Voulet's courier dispatches to the governor-general complained vaguely of inadequate water and supplies, the treachery of villagers, of imminent attack from Tuareg nomads whom he believed had infiltrated villages. The dispatches did not detail solutions pursued in the field, but it seems possible Voulet was preparing a defense—planting the idea that, to feed his men, he had no choice but to forcibly take what he needed. The violence disgusted several of Voulet's officers, though they were too afraid to question him.

But a lieutenant, dismissed early in the mission because of indiscipline, described atrocities in letters home to France. They were given to a government minister. And the commander of the Niger River post at Say, Captain Granderye, challenged Voulet's actions. Along the river, Granderye surveyed destruction, talked to villagers. He found that villages had welcomed the expedition, only to be sacked. "The left bank of the Niger River to [the village of] Sansane Haoussa has been put to fire and blood," he wrote the governor-general in March. Claims of a Tuareg threat, he added, "are completely false. There are no Tuaregs here... Our influence, the prestige of France are gone in this region."

In February, Voulet turned east, away from the river, along a path parallel to the border with British Nigeria. He chose the southern route to avoid Tuareg territory closer to the desert, and because he hoped to find more water.

To the casual witness, maybe a farmer looking up from his field, the expedition must have made a fantastic visual anomaly. Powerful, wonderfully foreign, terrifying, like a great parade gone drunkenly awry. First, on horseback, rode a line of eight white men in white uniforms, tight tunics and trousers. Black visored kepis with gold or red stripes of rank shielded their heads. They wore leather riding gloves and high boots. From the waist of each man hung a sword in its scabbard and a holstered pistol, though the farmer would not have recognized many of these things. Then he would have seen a column of Africans in blue tunics and red pantaloons, marching with rifles shouldered. Finally, he would have felt bewilderment and fear when he saw the supply train: a procession, stretching a mile or more, of emaciated camels, donkeys, porters and their families, women taken for the soldiers' pleasure, plodding on foot or astride beasts, while the weak clung to the backs of the strong. These, the farmer's own people, some 2,000 souls altogether.

Many villagers would have had time only to see soldiers—drafted from villages across the colonies—running them down with bayonets fixed. This, while the officers watched, a distant white line on horseback.

Advance surveyors of a road.

MARIKO SITS STRAIGHT up, looking ahead, ignoring the young soldier who has asked to see his identity card. The man snaps his fingers inches from Mariko's ear, something a young Nigerien would seldom do with an elder were he not given the artificial authority of a uniform and sidearm. "*Carte, Carte*," the soldier says. Mariko asks, "Where is your sense of dignity?" The soldier folds his arms. "I'm a citizen," Mariko says, "more of a citizen then you'll ever be." The driver sighs, as if to say, "Okay, here we go." The soldier opens the door. He says, "Get out."

I've seen this before. A passenger's stubbornness, demands for rights, then brief violence—a fist, a boot, a soldier's drawn gun. The nature of African road checkpoints. On this road, I have watched a soldier grab an old woman by the arm, and yank her, like a bag of clothing, from a bush taxi because she lacked an identity card, and another day, the beating of a driver who refused to pay a bribe.

We are at the checkpoint in Goure, 40 miles east of our prayer stop. Mariko might surrender his documents in another country, but this is Niger. The soldier waits, arms loose at his sides and hesitant

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to step forward to touch Mariko, sensing, possibly, a situation he may not be able to control. He is not used to such challenges and, perhaps, he sees something in Mariko's age and demeanor, the fact that he has resumed reading a book open on his lap, *Le Theatre de Sophocles*. The soldier begins to shuffle uncomfortably, like a student awaiting a grade.

Mariko looks at the soldier and points behind him, to a peasant woman crossing a field astride a donkey. In an even voice, he lectures. "There," he says, "there is a citizen who has a real identity and real rights," The soldier turns to look a moment. Mariko asks in Hausa, "*Kai bahaushe ne?*"—"You are Hausa, aren't you?" The man nods. He is young, fresh; he smiles nervously. Mariko aims at the soldier's roots, probably in a farm village. He continues in Hausa: "That woman works with her hands. She bears many children. She starves during drought, but has never stolen a thing." The soldier stares back. "And you," Mariko adds, "what do you do? What achievements can you claim? You haven't the integrity to occupy the same space as that woman." A pause, and in French he says, "*Tire sur moi si tu veux...*"—"Shoot me if you like, but I will not hand you my papers." They watch each other, Mariko the professor awaiting a response, and the soldier unsure how to reply.

Finally the young man frowns and waves us on. "Go on," he says, and walks over to unhook the rope strung between two posts across the road.

Mariko turns to me in the back seat. "Often they take a woman off a bush taxi because of some 'problem' with her papers. They tell the taxi to go, and then rape her." He speaks slowly; he wants this to sink in. "I've seen women's bodies in ditches along the road after they used them. The families never dare protest."

It occurs to me that Mariko carries on a struggle begun nearly a century earlier by Klobb.

"I'M WORRIED," Mariko says. The Land Rover bounces over hard track, three miles north of Goure and Route One. Village wells here give plenty of water and Mariko envisions garden and forestry projects, which, if successful, will serve as models for the region. "We are looking at the very last trees. Soon there will be nothing here but sand." The only plant relief is an occasional baobab or palm tree and patches of prosopis bushes in rocky ravines.

The vehicle is full now, carrying a forester and extension official from the district offices in Goure, men in their mid-20s, wearing European shirts and trousers. They nod gravely at Mariko, but struggle with me to imagine what the old man remembers. They have come to absorb his ideas and offer what they know. "I first visited this area in 1946," Mariko says. "It was all green."

The Land Rover slows near the base of a sandy ridge, a half mile across, where Mariko calls a halt before we reach loose sand. On foot, we follow him a couple of hundred feet to the very foot of the ridge, not far from a large baobab. In the wind his robe sticks to his legs and flaps behind him. He points his cane at the ridge-top. "The French camped there after they left Zinder. Lieutenant Meynier's journal describes a verdant land that was grassy and forested to the horizon." The two officials have heard this before. They shift and sigh, uncomfortable in the sun. Mariko talks with his back to us, and I suspect he knows how impatient the men are. On the ride out, in front of them, he told me, "When I'm talking to officials responsible for projects, I try to determine whether they reflect —even for a moment—on the meaning of rural development, on history and what this land once was, and on the needs of the people."

The men nodded respectfully, but now, standing in the sand, one whispers to me. "When you are well fed and healthy your whole life it's easy to have energy, but we who live at the bottom—" He shrugs. Niger has not had the money to pay its civil servants in six months.

Mariko's words interest me, but I sympathize with the officials. We walk a land that blinds eyes and mind, a land whose harshness I respect, but will never be accustomed to. This environment sucks up energy and patience. No one in this group but Mariko knows a broad landscape like the one Meynier observed, and Klobb rode across not far to the west. I lust for contrast, something green or purple, anything, a palm grove or lawn, and I am startled at how pleasing I find the fantasy of a golf course, whose controlled, artificial nature always repels me in my own country.

We have fallen behind Mariko, who is waiting beside the baobab. The tree stands perhaps forty feet high, with a great gray trunk and bare limbs that grow almost vertically. Its roots rise four feet above the

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Copies of Voulet's letters to Klobb are available in the Mission Afrique Centrale file. Voulet's "black chief" declaration is confirmed by the archive's copies of military reports on Klobb's murder.

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sand, exposing the wide, twisted dome the root limbs formed as they reached briefly outward and then thrust deep. The Hausa attribute special powers to great trees, which may explain this one's survival, only to suffer the indignity of the wind revealing the secret of its root system. "I know this tree." Mariko is looking at the forester and extension agent now. "I knew it as a child." I sense what is coming, a lecture that plays on fear, guilt. "Six years ago these roots were beneath soil." He knocks them with his cane. "This land was forested, but villagers cut trees for farms and firewood. Young people like you, I fear for you. How are you going to eat? I fear there is no future..."

No one responds.

After a while, Mariko starts back to the Land Rover and we are with him. "Hassan," he says to the forester, "tell me how the villagers are doing with their tree nurseries."

THE END WAS pathetic. Klobb's scouts tracked Voulet near Tessaoua, a market town [now on Route One]. The colonel sent four soldiers to tell the captain he was relieved of his command. Voulet replied in writing: "I will treat you as an enemy if you continue your march against me. I am resolved to sacrifice my life..." This was July 11. The same day Klobb rode through Koran-Kalgo and its wells filled with the dead. He took three days to close the gap.

Voulet, with a few soldiers, left the mission's camp to confront the colonel. The officers met on opposite sides of a field at the village of Dankori on Bastille Day, July 14. Klobb, his detachment flying the French tricolor, appealed again. Voulet ordered his men to fire on Klobb, who had told his men to hold fire. The captain was, after all, a French officer, and a French officer, Klobb had hoped, would not shoot another. Voulet reportedly pointed a pistol at his soldiers as he gave the order. Klobb, a bullet in his head, died with several of his men. Voulet fled and two days later his soldiers—angered by his threat to shoot deserters—shot him and Captain Chanoine at the village of May Jirgui, today split by the road.

The captains are entombed there in decaying concrete enclosed by an iron fence behind the village, a few meters south of the road. No one maintains the graves; the village chief keeps the iron name markers.

Lieutenant Meynier, slightly wounded in the leg, joined the surviving officers of the Central African Mission. They had gained control of the expedition and were continuing east. Klobb was eventually buried with honors in Timbuktu, where he had been commandant. A small cement memorial to him stands at the Tessaoua prefecture on Route One. Beneath his name is the inscription, "Died for France."

The findings of the military inquest—a copy is at the National Archives with the investigation reports—echo of panic, of frantic rationalization that invites a reader's impatience at first and, later, incredulity. The record regards Paul Voulet as an officer of "courage and intelligence," led astray by ambition. The inquest absolved the surviving officers of responsibility.

You read, shake your head.

The record concedes that Voulet declared himself—in speeches to his men after killing Klobb—"a black chief," founder of a bush empire that would rival France, drain the mother country's military and economic resources.

You squirm a little.

Sympathizers to the colonial cause push Voulet's defense with impressive imagination, blaming an illness called—depending on the preferred term—"*la Soudanité*" or "*le cafard*." A peculiar, vague form of nervous psychosis brought on by Africa. Heat, disease, the difficulty of getting on in a harsh climate. The words surface in the testimony of investigating officers. The anonymous preface to the Klobb-Meynier journal explains: "It is this state of absolute agitation with so many small causes that produces such regrettable effects."

At this, you might laugh □

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Fool's Journey

KEVIN ODERMAN

"It is in changing
that things find repose"
—Heraclitus

1.

27 Sept. Paros

FULLISH MOON over dry hills that in falling into darkness have lost all depth, become a bounding line only, between earth and sky. Sound of a mason scraping his tools at the end of day.

We make idiot journeys, or set out anyway with a goal we can't forget is mere pretense. Then we try to make something of them, a story perhaps, and fail. And given a stubborn nature, we try again, and fail, and again, and maybe then the failure, still a failure, begins to be of some interest. I sometimes think, and despair, such stories are most interesting just when they fail completely to give an account of the journey, and I wonder why journeys are necessary at all, but they are.

2.

30 Sept. Mykonos

WHITE ROOM. BABBLING of voices from the alley below, where pedestrians wander, restless, moving. Phrases in French or Greek, German or English, I never hear enough to make sense of any of it. Just the pulsing of language across tongues, and I like hearing that, hearing in it the very impulse to speak.

I said I wanted to catch a trout, a Lahontan cutthroat. We got out the maps. It was going to be a long journey from Frenchglen. We plotted a great loop, up out of the Blitzen Valley, south and east, over Catlow Rim and down, towards Denio in Nevada, but digressing at Fields, in Pueblo Valley, driving up into the Trout Creek Mountains, finding a place to catch that trout on Trout Creek, then back to Fields and north, with Steens Mountain towering in the west and the Alvord Desert flat as a plate off east, on up to Burns and back around, heading south between Malheur Lake and Harney Lake, paralleling the Malheur Wildlife Refuge, Steens Mountain in the east now, and back to Frenchglen. Almost 300 miles, a lot of it dirt. To catch a trout.

Of course, such fishing, such travel, always extends beyond itself, has a foot in metaphor if not in mystery. Sometimes only going will resolve a persistent if obscure question, or at least cure the fantasy that there is hope in travel or in fishing (and hope seems to reside most in trout fishing). As a boy, I had dreamed of catching a golden trout, kept a shimmering photograph of one pinned to my wall, but had never made the trip, never tried to actually hook one. It had seemed beyond hope. And I lived to regret my staying home. Sometimes, I think, one must step a little beyond Concord, even if in arguing I have to admit it makes no sense.

I had known about Lahontan cutthroats for years, about Trout Creek. But I had decided I wanted to hold one only recently, when I read in a Portland newspaper that the Fish and Game Commission had proposed closing Trout Creek to all angling to protect the native Lahontans, which they themselves had sometimes trapped to breed for release in other Oregon waters where the native trout had been overrun by hatchery strains (also "planted" by Fish and Game). Then, on a stopover in Bend on our way to Oregon's outback, I'd stood for a long while gazing into an aquarium of Lahontans at the High Desert Museum. They looked melancholy in there, as all fish in tanks do, but beautiful, their gill covers outrageously red, like a girl wearing too much blush but getting away with it, their tails speckled pell-mell with large, black dots. For a trout fisherman, for me anyway, there is always the question of the beauty of the fish.

But the desire to fish Trout Creek involved more than that, involved the creek itself. It is home to a pure strain of native Lahontans because it is an isolated drainage, has been for a very long time. The little stream drops down the Trout Creek Mountains, flowing only a little but always, then runs out into the flat land of Pueblo Valley and sinks into the sands. These are waters that never find the sea. The creek fails to fulfill the promise of running water, to be resolved in a great unity of waters in the end. Yet, it's in this water that the Lahontans swim, witnessing a wetter time, when the trout were native everywhere, and the waters of Trout Creek were joined to other streams on and on.

3. Actual Fishing

2 Oct. Mt. Kynthos, Delos

FROM HERE, THE ISLANDS float upon the suave waves, Rhenia and the islets near by, Mykonos, Tinos and Siros not so far, all buoyant, all but sacred Delos where I'm sitting securely on a stone. Delos feels solid, "unmoving," here at the center of the Cyclades. From the windy summit of Kynthos I suffer a familiar illusion, that I can see everything, or at least more than I can actually see. The islands, looking small and comprehensible. Down below, the ruins of ancient Delos lie exposed to the white

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sun, little shadow. On the map in my hand I see the sacred lake, once watched over by the nine marble lions of Delos from the height of their terrace just beyond. But the lake is dry now, and some of the lions have gone. In the absence of a lake someone has put up a stone wall, to show where the lake edge was when swans swam its waters. Just beyond and south lies the two-chambered harbor, to the left the harbor of commerce, which is busy with yachts and excursion boats from Mykonos, to the right the sacred harbor, properly empty, but silted in to the point that a boat would have to drive its prow into the sand to land there now.

At Fields there was a small plane in the parking lot, someone dropped in for pie or groceries. Must have landed on the highway and taxied in to park with the cars—there weren't many. We drove on, after a while seeing to our left the diminishing line of willows where Trout Creek gave out. Soon the road turned up a thin valley and the creek ran above ground, zigzagging between the road and where the hill began on the far side, a flood plain sometimes no wider than thirty yards. The creek ran in high, arid country, sometimes between basalt cliffs, but near it the brush was thick, sage and something thorny. We pulled off the road at a turnout and I geared up, a baby fly rod I hadn't used in years. I waded through the brush in shorts and sandals, remembering William Carlos Williams' wisdom, "you cannot live and keep free of briars," thinking I must really be living now.

I expected the fish to be willing, but getting close to the water proved difficult. Trout Creek, here anyway, watered the willows first, and they grew thick to show their appreciation. Too thick, most places, to get a line in the water. Where it was open enough the trout spooked at any motion, and in their darting spooked the fish in the next pool too. Finally I found a chute where the creek ran only two feet wide over lava blocks, a whitewater rush in heavy shade, where my approach went undetected. I stripped off a little line and shook my hopper down the current. In the first dark pocket there was a slashing take I missed, but when she came back I hooked her: willing, like a wild trout in a small, desert stream. I managed to keep her out of the brush; in my hand the Lahontan colors shone from under a silver sheen—the flushed look on the gill covers and the big spots.

I caught another one in a cow pasture a little later, standing midstream and making a long cast up an alley of willows. And I hooked a few others: every one of them took to the air, as if suddenly finding water too thick for living, trying to translate themselves into something more airy, something more like a bird. Most of them escaped me, anyway, in trying.

After a while Keith and I trailed back to the car, leaving the Lahontans to swim, ignorant, I imagine, how little downstream was available to them. We stopped for a while to watch some chukars climb the rock slide opposite, talking as they went, just as if they'd forgotten how to fly.

4.

4 Oct. Naxos

A WINDY MORNING, clouds streaming across the sun, shadows darkening the island. The wind registers in the talk of those walking the alley below this terrace: les vents, oi anemoi, die Winde, those winds, what boats will sail today?

On the townside of things I look down into a walled garden, now mostly finished for the season, but there are still lemons and limes in the trees, and pomegranates. Only this morning I noticed an odd thing about the garden: the blue, bleached door is padlocked by two rusty rings on the outside, but it's also barred from within.

Dust devils danced on the floor of Pueblo Valley as we passed again the end of Trout Creek, on to Fields, and the turn north along the broken edge of the great escarpment that is Steens Mountain. From the west, it is a long, gentle pull up to the summit, but on the east it's a dead drop. Driving, we looked up to it.

We were going north just to avoid going the same way back to Frenchglen, and had settled on a stew in the Alvord Hot Springs as an excuse for the extra miles. On the map, I noticed, Alvord Lake appeared as a blue bounding line, the interior crossed by diagonal blue

NATASHA TRETHEWEY

Family Portrait

Before the picture man comes
Mama and I spend the morning
cleaning the family room. She hums
Motown, doles out chores, a warning—

He has no legs, she says. *Don't stare.*
I'm first to the door when he rings.
My father and uncle lift his chair
onto the porch, arrange his things

near the place his feet would be.
He poses our only portrait—my father
sitting, Mama beside him, and me
in between. I watch him bother

the space for knees, shins, scratching air
as—years later—I'd itch for what's not there.

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lines, under the legend "dry." I got out another map, where it appeared all blue, but again with the notation "dry." Keith and I laughed a little about our maps, mapping what wasn't there, the memory of a lake. And there are dry lake beds everywhere out in Harney and Malheur counties; why are some on the map, some not? Is it the force of a name? In high water years we'd seen water in Alvord Lake, and in other years nothing there; we had to acknowledge the difficulty. But we'd seen water in lots of places in the mid-eighties where no lakes showed on either of these maps, seen Harney Lake and Malheur Lake join right over the highway as well, to form one lake, and yet this greater lake never got a name of its own before the waters receded.

Sometime after Fields we started seeing water, or mirage, off near the horizon, a sheer, silky blue. We looked and looked and argued, unable to decide if something was there or not, or if an illusion was the thing that was there. We were almost by before we knew for certain that there was a little water at the far edge of the alkali flats. By then, we were laughing at ourselves.

We crossed over the low rise between Alvord "lake" and the Alvord Desert and saw immediately that there was a lot more water in the desert than there had been in the lake. We were surprised, but not too surprised, because we'd seen water in the desert another time, from high up on the broken edge of Steens Mountain. That day, we'd heard that the location of the lake in the desert shifted day by day, even hour by hour, depending on the quarter of the wind. The Alvord is that flat, and on it the "lake" had wandered. Although it looked like a lake, it was almost without depth, so if you imagined a lake there it verged on illusion.

5. Into the Caldera

7 Oct. Santorini

TO ARRIVE AT SANTORINI by water is to float into the throat of the volcano, into the caldera. Lava cliffs all around. There was a mountain, and arriving ships sail into its absence; where there was a mountain, now there is none, just a rim of island to remember where its slopes once climbed to a summit. It has been gone 3,500 years, but its memory hangs yet in the sky over the caldera, or in the mind's eye. The volcano that created the mountain and then did the damage is still live. On the black lava islet of Nea Kameni, in the center of the bay, the smell of sulfur rises yet from the hot springs bubbling up from underground.

I arrived yesterday, drifted to port on a ferry, weary. Today my table is set by a window swung out over the caldera, set like the little town of Fira, directly on the cliff edge, as if on a dare or as a mad assertion of how we must live. The damage has been done, nothing doing but to build regardless on what remains.

I sit at this table and grip my pen, telling myself, hang on.

Keith slowed the car when the cement tanks at Alvord Hot Springs showed at last on the right. We were surprised to see somebody down there but decided to have a look and maybe a soak anyway. The path from the highway down to the bathing tanks parallels the water from the springs that runs too hot to touch and smells eggy. It makes a little stream, which meanders steaming through ground crusted white with mineral deposits and choked with orange and green slime. So I wasn't too disappointed to discover three lean ranchers had emptied the tanks for a once-a-year cleaning—no bathing that day. They were coots and we liked them, but what we were they weren't too sure. Finally, in a tribute to what two weeks in the desert can do to a man, one of the ranchers asked, "Is you fellas sheep herders or somethin'?"

We drove on but it was as ghosts of travelers; we journeyed beyond what we knew to be the end of the story—just to get back to Frenchglen. It often turns out this way. And traveling beyond the end of the story, where sometimes meaning is made or sustained, always raises the rancher's question about who we are; traveling far enough, maybe, the question becomes not who, but what. □

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After the Procession

During Which the Child in the Crowd Shouted, "But the Emperor Has No Clothes!"

S. L. WISENBERG

AT FIRST THEY WERE grateful. Exactly as you have heard. "Out of the mouth of a babe," they said. A collective sigh. "We always knew that emperor was a fool."

My outburst had terrified my parents. My mother used to say, "Those few seconds right after you blurted it out, that was the longest silence of my life." And even after the relief of pure, universal acceptance, they stayed scared. They agreed to everything. Let the emperor's court artist paint my picture. We went for dinner with the emperor, who tried to laugh off the whole affair as a joke, even gave me some of the real golden thread that his ministers had repossessed from the thieves—"a souvenir," he said. He called me "a rosy forthright child," and gave me a sweet-smelling crimson bouquet. But his life had changed because of what I had said. He could not gain face, and soon crept away into early retirement in a country villa.

I cannot say when they turned against me. Who can mark when hairline changes begin? At school the other children teased me, calling me "she who tells all." Pretended that I had a special way of divining who had done their homework and who had not. Watched my every move. They would not confide in me; I knew too much. They pulled at my clothes. They said I was naked when I was fully dressed. I knew I was not. Then I began to doubt.

The elders began to point me out as I walked through the streets. They said loudly: "There goes the one who caused dissension to rip our community. The common people no longer listen to their superiors," adding that there had been no trouble at all until the child of a lowly tradesman had ridiculed the emperor and his ministers. They wondered aloud why my parents had no other children.

The neighbors shunned us. My father's carpentry business dwindled to orders from just a few loyal friends. I had dreams. You have had them: You are sitting in a schoolroom, stand up in order to leave, realize you are wearing nothing but your undergarments. Or you are at a grand dinner and are completely unclothed, the napkin too small to cover your nakedness. The evil letters came after that, and messages scrawled on the front of our house: "Why did the crops fail this year?" Rumors grew that I had had something to do with the fire at the granary.

My whole life became denial, apology. The people began to miss the emperor. He had been replaced by his brother, a dour, emaciated man who never smiled, rarely showed himself in public. He brought his own ministers with him. They were as pinched up as he was, corrupt, would send their minions to farms in all the districts, demanding the fattest calves and lambs for the emperor's table. They all had accents. The emperor was remembered as jolly, foolish, harmless. He had never raised taxes. He had been benign. Vain, silly, gullible, foppish, but had never meddled too closely into the lives and pockets of his subjects. Laissez-faire, with a giggle.

A clandestine movement grew, determined to bring him back to power. Intrigue swelled, spreading mistrust from household to household. The townspeople began to reminisce about the public circuses and flamboyant harvest festivals, his magnificent wardrobe—seen and unseen. You could hear the muttering: "What was the reason that he went into exile, anyway? He was doing a fine job. Until that witchgirl had to open her mouth."

One night men burst into the house, their faces covered with black cloths. They shoved me out of bed, shouting, "That's the one!" They pulled at my arms. "Don't struggle," they said, "We got ahold of you. You can't get away." My parents stood in the shadows. Feigning yawns. Smoothing each other's nightrobes. I think I heard my mother say, "That child never looked anything like us."

My mouth was gagged, a band tied around my eyes; I was thrown into a wagon that clanged down the cobblestones, into a bare cottage on the outskirts of town. I was fed by anonymous souls in dark rags who would not speak to me. In time, I came to believe that I did not belong with the rest of the townspeople. I signed a petition urging the emperor to return. I agreed to remain in exile. It was right that I be separated from the community. I felt: Yes, absolutely, I deserved it. I vowed a life of silence, eyes cast down. I swallowed my fate. □

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Silent Retreat

A Story by Lucia Nevai

The ashram was formerly the estate of a robber baron who made his fortune in railroads. The exterior of the mansion had been painted a hilarious, jumpy orange. It was a shade of orange that would do fine in a very hot, very spiritual country like India or Mexico, but here, under the gray, interdenominational skies of upstate New York, looked flimsy and Halloweenish.

Registration for Silent Retreat read a little sign. I followed the arrow into the kitchen where a beautiful, starved-looking girl in long white robes sat at a desk. "I'm Kali," she said. After I'd written out a check for the full amount, Kali said, "Please remove shoes." I did. She then said, "Now, your room. Please follow." I felt very self-conscious and lummoxy, padding up the carpeted steps of the grand central staircase in not my newest pair of socks behind a girl in a sheet who had clearly been raised in a middle-class suburb somewhere and was now affecting Indian-immigrant syntax.

"Your bed," Kali said, pointing to the narrowest of three in a large sunny room which, based on the huge, fanciful oak window seat had once been the nursery. I poked the mattress. I put my overnight kit on the nightstand. "Om Shanti," Kali said as she closed the door.

I sat down on the bed feeling fat and frowsy. *I should have gone to a spa,* I thought. *To a hairdresser and a spa.* If Peg and Sal could see me now. For a week, they'd tried to talk me out of this crazy adventure. They used the hygiene angle, saying the young people in places like this one shared combs, underwear and toothbrushes; they were convinced I'd get head lice. They are very dear, my two oldest friends, each in their own way. Peg lost a son in Viet Nam, so she knows what I'm going through. Sal lost a fingernail in a restaurant so she *thinks* she does.

I'm here because nothing else has worked and I'm sick of being a bitter old nobody whose main claim to fame is that her only child is a vegetable. Alma, my daughter, attended Silent Retreat twice. She was driving up to number three when a tractor trailer hit her head-on. That was five years ago. Yes, five. And I visit her every day.

On my pillow is a typewritten schedule for the entire weekend, indicating meal times, meditation times, when to walk in the woods, when to rest. It is Friday, February 5th at 4:00: time to rest. I try to. I try very hard to. I set an example by lying very still with closed eyes even though the two other female participants enter noisily, coughing, sniffling, unzipping screechy duffle bags, banging hangers, dropping hair brushes on the floor. I am certain this will ruin the retreat. These ashram people are serious people and they know what they're doing. If they tell you to rest, it's because you need to rest. I would point this out to the ladies but how can I when we're all keeping silence?

The schedule calls for us to snack for an hour beginning at 6:15 p.m.—that's how I choose to interpret it. We gather in a high-ceilinged ballroom with sky-blue, deep-pile, wall-to-wall carpeting. Everyone else lowers themselves gracefully to the floor on folded legs. I land with a thud; my legs won't cross. Kali brings each of us one pear, six dates and a vitamin C. Consumption time: one minute. If Peg and Sal could see me now. *I'm hungry,* I write to Kali. "Light diet is best for silence," she says. "Keeps the mind alert." *I'm thirsty,* I write. She brings me, she brings us all Chamomile tea.

Swami Barami enters with his sitar encased in a playful custom calico bunting. With pain, I see that he's aged since the photo Alma keeps—kept?—in her meditation corner was taken. His hair is black as kohl and he smells like heaven. His skin is beautifully clean and oiled. His irises are both dark and bright; they glow with farce. He tunes the instrument at length. It's nothing but a vegetable, he giggles. All it is is a giant gourd, he says, a gourd that's carefully dried for ten years, then shellacked. Everything he says makes him laugh.

He plays. His head is bowed as his well-calloused fingers fly vigorously over the strings. The expression on his face is intense and courageous. The raga is a rain of ten million notes and not one of them falls on me. I spend all of Session One looking around the room, totally, but totally unimpressed by the other participants. Alma told me there were eight to twelve participants, men and women of all ages, and that a marvelous intimacy developed among them over the course of the three silent days, an intimacy that caused them all to agree on Sunday evening when the silence was broken that had they talked their hearts out for three days, they could not have arrived at so deep a sensitivity and so natural a respect for one another.

What I see is losers. Everyone with an attitude. There's a big, unhealthy brooder sitting in the club chair with a ski hat pulled down over his ears, withdrawn and morose. There's a married couple who are showing off their meditation style, matching salt and pepper shakers, backs straight, hands distorted in ashram sign language in their laps. There's a golden-haired youth just in from the West Coast, lying against

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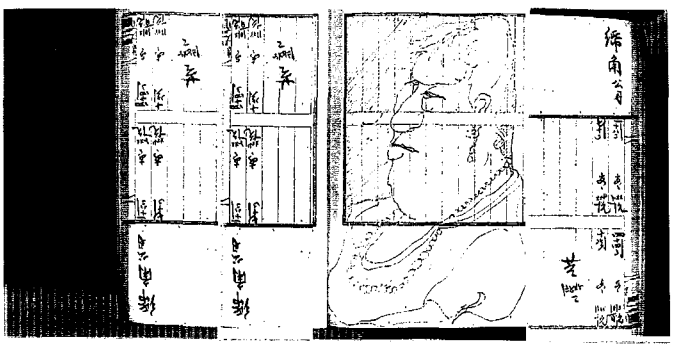
the celestial blue of the carpet, his beautiful hands falling open, eternal as statuary. There's a snoopy young woman writing an article about this. Like me, she's looking around and she doesn't look impressed either, especially when she sees me, spying on her through ragged bangs, clasping and unclasping, clasping and unclasping my hands.

At night, someone snores. I'm sure it's her.

Just before morning, I dream of walking across a vast plain of mud. It is soft, slick, coffee-brown mud; a thin layer of it apparently covers the entire planet. I'm walking and walking. In the mud I see a fleck of gold. I kick at it. It gets longer. *It's Alma's lost locket,* I think in the dream, *her little gold neck chain with the heart-shaped locket.* I pick at it. I pull. It turns into something that nips my wrist like a cat that doesn't like the way you're petting it. Then whatever-it-is evaporates.

Who am I? I wonder during our silent breakfast. Alma knew me as no one knew me. That's why I can't let her go. Letting Frank go was easy. He was just a man, a noisy, loyal man who liked to eat and hear me sing. When he died, I was sad, but I had Alma, I had Alma.



In Session Two we sit so long, it's physically painful. Session Three is worse. I sleep. Our silent walk which I've been looking forward to all morning is just as hard on my back and legs as the sitting. I spend Session Four looking at the others. All faces are strained, all backs look pinched, all brains weak from fasting. Your instructions are simply to listen, Swami Barami giggles at the beginning of each session. I try to obey but Silent Retreat is not working on me. I decide to leave early. I have a return bus schedule in my purse. I will go to Snack, then sneak out and take the bus back.

We straggle separately across the grounds of the ashram to the lodge for Snack. A few hard clear constellations are maintained in the winter sky like tools in an arctic outpost. Inside the lodge, we fill our bowls. Soup, flavorful, pungent soup. I go back for more three times. The clinking of the steel spoon in the institutional tureen is harsh and hollow. The radiator sizzles. These sounds which should evoke comfort and shelter echo instead with desolation, confirming the isolation each one of us feels. Single file we follow Swami Barami back to the ballroom.

He tunes the sitar. The brooder takes off his ski hat. The married couple sit on opposite sides of the room. The golden youth lies on the carpet with open hands but he looks less like statuary now, more like a man for whom the essence of things keeps slipping through his fingers. The writer and I have been competing each session to commandeer a huge, particularly soft pillow; this time she donates it to me. I'm grateful; I'm pooped. I plop down with a thud, then realize I forgot to leave.

At the sound of the first note, I feel an alertness in my bloodstream. The music is like a golden thread, helping me sit. I feel a sorrow that is rounded with a bird's-eye overhead love. The raga is blazing away. I am the source of each one of the ten million notes. Hello Peg, Hello Sal, I think to myself, who's meditating now?

In the morning, Session Six is a snap. During Reflection, I wander into the library. I'm feeling confident; I go hog-wild; I read the *Kama Sutra.* I spend a few minutes hoping Alma never did any of this. Then I notice a position that Frank and I inadvertently held for ten minutes one evening when I knocked his glasses onto the floor. I reached down for his glasses while we were still engaged and I almost had them when our houseguest knocked on the bedroom door asking for towels. I told the guest where the linen closet was. Then because the bathroom shared a very flimsy wall with our creaky iron bed, Frank and I hung fire in this unusual position with me half off the bed while the guest took a very quiet bath. Hello Peg, I'm thinking, Hello Sal, look who's tantric!

Swami Barami brings the Silent Retreat to a close with a session of chanting, then we have a feast. There are flowers on the table in the lodge, and one big beautiful vegetable dish after another. We can talk now, but we don't feel like it. We smile at each other as we fill our plates. There are platters of gleaming fire-orange carrots, mounds of blue-green broccoli florets, lacy rounds of green and yellow squash looking as lively and intelligent as starfish, spicy red pepper strips sautéed with toasted peanuts and garlic, stir-fried rice with ginger and scallions, a seven-grain bread so smart you could send it to college.

Swami Barami sits in the middle of us, wearing his favorite toy, a red plastic fireman's hat with a revolving, flashing red light on top. I admire it so passionately, he offers to let me try it. When I click on the battery-operated siren, the others applaud. I notice that Kali and Shakti and Shiva look a little left out, eating at their quiet distant table. *Unplug me,* Alma says. *In the morning,* I tell her, *in the morning.* When I give Swami the hat back, I thank him *his* way, touching the center of my forehead with the fingertips of my praying hands. □

WILLIAM FRANCIS BISBEE

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The Ballad of John, Who Turns Fifty Soon, and Judy, Too

A Story by Maxine Chernoff

American folkways are crammed with figures who strike us as too large, especially these days when life is distinctly small. Nor have we traditionally been allowed our less than perfect heroes, reluctant and finicky, who must be cajoled into accepting the responsibility for carrying forth the story of our people. But such a man is John, who turns fifty in November.

John is a reluctant hero first and foremost because of Judy. Without Judy, he might lead this story anywhere. But Judy, tongue perpetually in cheek, refuses to validate John when he chooses a bold new shirt or a brave new Internet discussion group. Judy sees herself as sharing a moment in history with John, though neither may christen it singly. They cohabit on this earth; cojoined, they cosign for everything they own. The ampersand is their boat's figurehead. The John and Judy sail in perilous waters but remain afloat. To call it "John's life" or "Judy's" would signal the end of the voyage.

Our story finds them in their middle years subsisting on soil sometimes too barren to support them both, especially during an emotional drought. Judy has been seen ripping her nightgown to shreds. John was once observed throwing a toaster in Judy's direction. Though these scenes may strike some witnesses as hostile or desperate, they are coping devices that keep John and Judy sane and together.

But enough of Judy. This is the ballad of John, a white man in America on the cusp of an important birthday, a tall noble male with a patrician brow, who, in another century, might have been an archer, or, even earlier in this century, president of a private club whose blazer bore an important insignia. At this time, however, John's status is diminished. Rumors abound that the fate of white males at the edge of the millenium is indeed a dark one. Judy, who cannot suppress her bold humor even to save her marriage, remarks that he should feel reassured: on the obituary pages of the august New York paper they read on the opposite coast of their stolid continent, white males still matter. "Only one woman died this whole week!" Judy exclaims, "And she was a World War II flyer, who appeared rather manly. There was a certain chiseledness about her profile."

Judy's point that only men make the esteemed obituary pages is correct, even in John's view. John used to think that Judy was funny, but these days, as a person decides to redecorate in a more subtle color, John has resolved to tone things down. He is forgetting to laugh an awful lot. He is forgetting to feel a passing sympathy for most just causes. He is thinking of voting Republican for the first time in his life. He is feeling a knot of responsiblity in the back of his neck. Is it racial or ethnic or national? Is it personal, impersonal, self-interested, well-informed, pure or impure? He can't decide.

"It's a surprise that I never did before," he says to Judy.

"Did what?" she asks.

"Vote Republican."

She looks at him with an odd glaze over her eyes which makes John think of aspic. "Life's a surprise," Judy assures, "every last moment. The vastness of our love, John, is a special surprise, which will most likely endure a change of political allegiance—only don't talk about it in front of the kids!"

Has she said *special* or *especial*? John needs to gauge the disdain in Judy's response, but asking her at this tense and fragile moment? He feels the huge rubberband of their lives stretched to breaking. Fear raises the emotional barometer, but still he is hopeful.

Now in its third decade, their love has endured. People whom they know—Lorraine and Charles, Frank and Doris (how do we decide whose name goes first in a duo?)—say "John and Judy" with the certainty of brie and chardonnay, Bulls and Jordan, or the Sudan and misery. Judy has taken to muttering as she completes her chores before going to work. She worries that it's an early sign of menopause, or worse, Alzheimer's, this incessant chorus of whispers that accompanies her around the house. As she pours the dishwasher powder into the oblong hole that won't contain it, she counts on

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her mental fingers through nine, or is it ten, presidents until she reaches the present. Her smooth jaws flap with his name. She has known John through all but four presidents in her life. This poignant, quirky timeline leads to a few tears shed onto the counter as the dishes begin their 68-minute route to cleanliness. Before they are dry she will be at work, doing her best to interpret the nuances of her client's speech, doing her best to forget John's political affiliations until dinner.

John can remember watching television in bed with Judy when they were little sprouts drinking Boone's Farm Apple wine under American flag-patterned sheets. Judy was four sizes smaller. John had frequent bouts of coughing after inhaling the cheap, home-grown marijuana they bought from their former ethics professor. They slept naked, showered together, and quarreled rarely. John had introduced Judy to a drink made of a mixture of beer and tomato juice. To this day, John knows that Judy is proud of him for having invented it. Did John invent it? He can't remember anymore. The past, like a swollen door, creaks on its hinges. He does know that when Nixon left the White House, they both cheered wildly and slapped palms and danced a festive jig. They were both in grad school though an early pregnancy was about to fling parenthood into their lives with typhoon force. But Neil the first, as they still call him, was a good, mild baby. They took him to classes, where he rarely made a peep. Judy nursed him through finals and continued to get A's. She wrote her dissertation while he rocked in his used baby swing, eyes agog at the psychedelic mobile of fish, planets, and fat clouds. Today, he is a handsome swarthy lad with supple muscles and a peculiarly likable though uneven squint of the eyes. He hasn't ever disappointed them in an important way, John says as they share a tall Weissbier at their favorite alehouse overlooking Muir Beach.

"But in lots of unimportant ways!" Judy laughs. She rubs her green eyes with her knuckles in a childlike gesture that John finds disarming. If she asked him not to vote Republican at this precise moment, he might consent in deference to her.

Their two younger children, Teddy and Andrew, are still unknown quantities, meaning grade school busies them with its innocence. They haven't made love or war yet, haven't even lost their simple, generic, kind wide-eyedness. That's why Judy feels she must save John from his fate. The children still look up to him. They need him for important assurance in their lives beyond the usual baseball toss in the backyard as the grill sizzles and smoke chokes the noisy scrub jays in the California pines.

"We need you" is written in the inevitable glow of their upturned faces even as John winces at a Supreme Court decision or a ball tossed errantly by a worthless million-dollar player. Why does he notice all the trouble, Judy wonders, unloading the dishwasher and putting their post-cocktail hour dinner of stir fry onto the table. They had gone to the alehouse because they are alone, the children off at summer camp for two weeks, Neil the first touring Italy with his Caribbean/Italian/Jewish high school pal, Giancarlo R.

"I always thought my life would make some sort of history," John confesses when Judy brings the sweating flour tortillas to the table in a pretty chicken-shaped basket.

"Why?" Judy asks, listless and guarded. These are the kinds of discussions that currently try their souls.

"It was my destiny to do something. Didn't you think so?"

"Well, I guess," she says, spearing a small sliver of rare singed beef, turning aside a tomatillo.

"I mean, what we had when we were young seemed so damned major, but now everything I can get my hands on seems distinctly minor."

"Can you be more specific?" she asks and flashes on a client today who found it impossible not to talk in clichés. 'I think the pigeons have come home to roost—or is that chickens?' 'I think the early bird. . . gathers no moss?' Judy quipped to stave off her death by boredom, the water torture for which she is paid at the going rate. Insurance companies have hatched a plot to end all this. Soon she and her clients will be victims of case management, more meddling in human relations. She and John are in solidarity, politically, on the subject of corporate and governmental interference. "Soon nothing will be private!" they exploded in unison watching a recent *Frontline.*

But John has been speaking on quite some other topic for some time when Judy rejoins him. "I mean I was in on some key plays."

This is John at his worst, sports metaphors substituting for particulars, a man who uses words—an economist, the author of three books—at a loss for them. Judy slams down the salt and picks up her fork.

"Please, John, tell me in language that means something. What's the source of your disappointment?"

"I don't know," John smiles meekly. "I just feel it haunting me, dogging my trail, nipping at my heels."

"Work is fine, right?" Judy asks him of his comfortable sinecure at a world-class university.

"It's okay," pensive John responds.

"And we're okay, right?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"And the kids are okay?"

"I'd assume so"

"So what's not okay?"

"The world is spinning out of my grasp. I'm becoming irrelevant."

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"Isn't everyone?" Judy shrugs. "So much so that electronic mail addresses everybody at once. It doesn't matter who receives it—you, me, the next person. We're voices out there, each contesting for an owner. Soon 'I said that' will be as old-fashioned as polio and hats for church."

"It doesn't bother you, Judy?"

"It makes me crazy."

There is a long silence. In an earlier part of their marriage, Judy might have been observed to tear her nightgown or John throw a toaster.

"Let's go to bed," Judy suggests, not knowing why this moment has elicited this tender feeling.

"In the middle of dinner?"

"The kids are away, and you need saving."

"How will this help?"

"I think I can save you."

"But then I won't be the hero. You will."

"Heroine is so old-fashioned," Judy agrees, "so I guess hero will cover this situation."

"Well, what about me?"

"We'll figure that out later, John. Now come with me," Judy insists, rising from the table.

With an expression of comic surrender, John grabs her fist and is led to their foam-covered loft. Judy is thinking of pleasure as she imagines John's assured self between her legs, how easily they find each other in bed without ideology or burdening thoughts. John is undressing. He pictures his hand pulling the lever in the voting booth come November. He smiles wide to think how this small action will somehow give him back the world. □

WILLIAM FRANCIS BISBEE

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Injuries and Damages

A Story by Don Shea

The first thing that occurred to Willy and me when we saw those big chunks of plaster all over Willy's bed and the exposed wooden lathes in the ceiling was, wow, what a piece of luck that it happened when nobody was home and not when Willy was in the bed either copping Zs or engaged in a carnal encounter with his new wife, the sweet Rowena, because the ceiling falling in on them like that, the entire damn ceiling of their East 9th Street tenement apartment bedroom coming loose like that, could have done them serious harm and cost them a considerable sum for medical attention, money they didn't have at the moment even for far happier purposes.

The second thing that occurred to us was, boy, if Willy and/or Rowena *had* happened to be in bed at the time of the ceiling collapse, and if they survived the event (which was, after all, highly likely), then, boy, would they have some case against the vicious, venal, wholly unprincipled landlord who kept his buildings in such appalling condition while undoubtedly sucking up single malt scotches and wolfing down pink slabs of rare roast beef in pricey East side boites surrounded by fawning chorus girls. The idea blossomed like a giant flower. Jesus, what a lawsuit! Struggling artist and bride, nascent Michelangelo and consort, struck down by treacherous ceiling, grievous wounds, future fear of ceilings, many fruitful avenues of legal attack, huge sums in settlement!

The third thing we thought of was, wow, it was really too bad in a way, almost bad luck in a sense, that neither Willy nor the sweet Rowena was in bed at the time, not that Willy would have wished the slightest harm upon the sweet etc., not in a million years. But if they *had* happened to be in bed at the exact moment when the ceiling declared its independence (and God knows they were certainly putting in the sack time, the marriage being only a few months old), why then they could very probably have turned a good scare and some mild bruising into something splendid like a million dollar judgment that would have kept Willy in burnt sienna and rose madder for a lifetime, while also providing the leisure to apply them.

And the fourth thing that occurred to us was this: *no one knew* whether Willy and/or the sweet etc. happened to be in that bed or not when the ceiling decided to take a dive.

Okay, so the fifth thing was pretty obvious. The fifth thing was, hey, why not just *say* Willy was in the bed at the time, and this was followed quickly by the sixth thing, actually a cluster of thoughts around the realization that to go after the kind of settlement Willy had in mind, to build a strong, credible case, it was going to be necessary to . . . well . . . to *bang Willy around some.* 'No pain, no gain' was the essence of number six, and I have to tell you it caused Willy some noticeable anxiety even though he agreed with the logic and rationale supporting this particular number.

The seventh thing was kind of a debate or negotiation between Willy and me, really a question of degrees, with Willy as you would expect opting for less banging around and me for a tad more, although God knows I took no pleasure at the prospect of wounding my good buddy, whom I cherished. (Okay—total truth now—there was that time a year or so ago when I was chatting up a certified American Beauty Rose at the Old Reliable Bar, blasting every charm bolt I had at this heart-stopping honey while entertaining dark bestial thoughts in the back corridors of my mind. I excused myself to hit the head, where I ran into a small line, and by the time I got back Willy had slithered up next to her like a snake in heat and damn near snatched away her affections in their entirety.)

But this historical reflection I include for the record. It did not affect my judgment, I assure you, which was colored by questions of realism, medical veracity, and size of potential settlement, and eventually Willy and I agreed on the eighth thing, which was an approach to the requisite infliction of injuries whereby he was to lie on the floor on his stomach with his shirt off and I was to mount an adjacent step ladder carrying chunks of the actual fallen plaster and bombard him with these until we achieved some sort of visible results.

The ninth thing was nothing I wish to dwell on—a short, ugly piece of business featuring me flinging megachunks of jagged plaster down on the naked back of my best buddy and him bellowing "OW, OW, OW, OW, OW!" the while.

But only a very short while, for this ill-advised and incipiently criminal undertaking was interrupted and indeed curtailed completely by the tenth thing, to wit, the arrival of the sweet Rowena, who walked in upon this scene with a facial expression that cannot be described, and once she understood that Willy and I were not engaged in some bizarre and hitherto unsuspected perversion, she moved with unswerving wifely instinct to protect her husband from further assault while simultaneously delivering a spirited diatribe on the felonious nature of fraudulent lawsuits and the limited availability of proper natural light for painting in most prison environments, the latter being a consideration that hadn't even occurred to Willy or me.

Willy healed up within a few days, by which time Rowena professed to see genuine humor in the event.

And I discovered I had finally forgiven Willy completely for his egregious behavior that night at the Old Reliable, that night when we both met that sweet Rowena for the first time. □

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Telephone

A Story by Steven Barthelme

It'll be like this. The phone will ring, at some wrong time, some time the phone never rings, six o'clock in the evening or four a.m., or noon. It's Ben, my brother. Ben always knows everything first, makes it his business to know things, so it'll be him. How is he going to sound? Cool? Weeping? That high-serious voice he gets whenever something terrible happens? No, that voice isn't for truly terrible things, but for those things we treat as terrible, talisman to protect us from the really terrible. The phone rings, it's Ben. "Tommy," he says, "I just got a call from Baltimore. It's Pop—"

No, that's not it. It'll be a message on the answering machine, the rectangular red light blinking when I go into the kitchen in the morning, and I'll see it and I'll think it's something else, someone I want to hear from, something maybe I want to hear, something that I've been waiting for, something good. It'll be Ben, of course, leaving a message. The message will say, "Pop died this morning at—" and then there'll be some time, he'll say "5:55 a.m." the way people do, as if it made any difference. It'll be some picturesque time, like 5:55 a.m., some time which stays in your brain forever after, not a time you can forget.

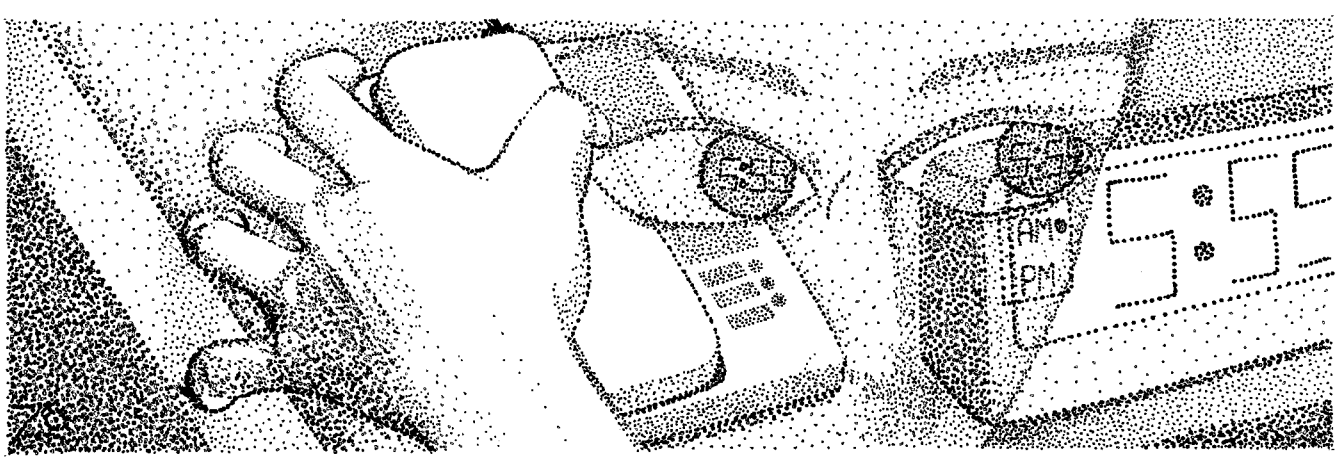
Then the message will continue, Ben sounding like a cop. "Call me. I'm flying over there this afternoon, and if I haven't heard from you, I'll call you when I get there. Mom is okay, just crazy. Laura is taking care of her, she's at Laura's house. That number is—well, you have Laura's number . . ." Then the message will change, his voice will change, he'll say, "I didn't know this was going to be this way, I didn't know . . ." and he won't be able to finish the thought. "Call me," he'll say.

I am standing in the kitchen, listening to my brother on the answering machine. I'm half awake. I don't feel anything. I have to wait for some place where I'm safe enough to feel something. I have been waiting for this message for twenty-five years, since my father was about sixty. This is what it'll be like. Twenty-five years of waiting wasted. This is it. What is it like? Standing in my kitchen. I will punch the rewind and play the message again. ". . . at 5:55 a.m.," my brother says. "I didn't know this was going to be this way," he says. It's over, I will think. As a child, when my mother wasn't home, I used to listen to sirens, stand looking out the big windows of the front room, looking into the empty carport, waiting for her car to be back in its place, and it always came back.

As a child, I got to play chess with him. He would lie on his elbow on the kingsize bed and I would sit on a low stool, the wooden chessboard on another stool between us. Sometimes he was in pajamas. Maybe he was letting me win, those times I won. Now, middle-aged, I remember things he said, advice, some of it. He did not say, It's bad and then it gets worse. Once he took one of his records, with 'Unbreakable' printed on the label, and bent the record in half until it broke. "Not unbreakable," he said, and then he laughed. What kind of person would do that? I think. I like to think that twenty-five years anticipating has immunized me against emptiness, but it isn't so.

I wanted my father to be all the things that an ideal man is supposed to be, a hero. He wasn't far off the mark, really. He got worse as I got older, but my idea of what a hero was incorporated worse things, too. And it kept things orderly for him to be a hero. He has been a stranger to me since I was about twenty-five, twenty years.

The telephone will ring, it'll be the message, this is how it will feel, I can imagine it. I will feel like an animal standing at the margin of a field beside a fence, head high as if catching a new, totally unknown scent, afraid but not terrified, confused but not bewildered, hurts to swallow, feeling all the muscles in my jaw, in my arms, unable to run, not wanting to run, hearing my heartbeat. I will do what I'm supposed to, walk, talk, a suit. I can imagine it. □



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■

Gary Gildner

Helmut K., Blowing Smoke Rings

A good cigar is essential; also cognac and, for me, the memory of my grandmother. A remarkable woman who enjoyed fine tobacco. Not to mention her freedom and men. By six different, shall we say, gallants, she produced six children. As a girl she worked for an inn that kept horses, and now and then she rode off somewhere. Taking her rest in a haystack. Who knows how many lovers she met in this way. Very healthy, very strong—even in her eighties mongering fish, barking the saltiest tongue. But then a broken leg that never healed properly. I stood by the bed as she lay reviewing her youth, those horses—the good ones, the stubborn. No comparison, I daresay, with *our* little diversion. As chance would have it, a certain horse was named Ferdinand, the same as the king, the same as the man with whom she issued my father. A big stallion with one eye. Ah, how this caused my grandmother to erupt in robust tearful laughter! I find such things of interest. My mother's eyes, unlike mine, alas, were blue and glittered, my father always said, like diamonds. After my birth she shook constantly, and fell into deep depression: her condition required a special medication and the doctors kept trying to wean her off it due to the cost. Notice, by the way, how well my rings hold their shapes even as the evening air drifts in. Finally, at twenty, she leaped from a window. My father carried her small likeness—that quaint term—to all the provinces. For years operating *das karussel* in a kind of children's circus. I would follow along like a pet crow. When I achieved my present success as head of the company—by keeping my eyes open, I might add—I wanted to do something nice for this man. But what? I gave the matter considerable thought. At length he himself provided the answer: had I ever heard about the dragon, high in Peru, that was carved from a single emerald? This news surprised me. I had not realized he was still so romantic. Of course I booked our passage at once—it would be a wonderful adventure, stimulating, good for the spirit, the blood. The altitude, however, proved to be too much. One day while climbing with me he collapsed. No warning, nothing. Thus I buried him there among the clouds of Cuzco. Fascinating, don't you think, where such simple pleasures as we are having can lead us?" □

CHRISTOPHER DAVIS

Let Go the Ghost of Icarus

Ideal mother, please stay far away
from this dead saint's bloodless lips.
At his kitchen sink Sunday,
the morning after, both men
kept mute, sighing
down into his cold cups.
Can others see under
a clay deathmask's stiff lip
the globe trapped in this skull?
Imagine it a flooded dome,
a cesspool of fluid shadows,
the black murk halfway risen
to the vaulted ceiling buried
under a knit brow, the eyelids
closed, its eyeballs bent
forever in, in love
with unreflected deeps.
Out in the brine, a swimming
soul thrashes
a whirlpool forward,
back a wake. Through our dim breath, the white
wrists flicker. The fingers knifing
down create fresh holes
in the wet shroud, the corpse
a spermcell working closer, ever
coming, never
born, trapped
too deeply in death's promise
for becoming, never lifted out,
rocked on dry land, nor held
in warm arms even now, a wave responding
in thy mouth, a worried
prayer kissed
from your lips.

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WHAT MIGHT HURT YOU

A Story by Alison Brevard

I come from a long line of worriers. I learned early that one thing you have to worry about constantly is what might hurt you. Mama had a list in her head on these matters. I began compiling a list that combined Mama's worries and my own:

Betty, the mean cow in the back pasture who would hook you if you looked at her wrong.

The big, nameless rooster who hated children and would chase you around until you dropped.

Fire, as in matches behind the barn or fireworks such as the Roman candle which blew up in my face one Fourth of July night and which required a doctor being at our house for two hours picking powder marks out of my face. He did not do a good enough job, because I was never "Miss Anything" in the pantheon of beauty contests stretching like a long clothesline through every Southern hamlet, town, and city from time immemorial.

Hellfire as in "You will burn in hellfire for all eternity" if you do forbidden things or even think bad thoughts.

Men uptown whom you did not know and who might hurt you.

The devil himself, who was just waiting to entice young, tender children into performing evil deeds.

Miss Margaret, fourth grade teacher, who pulled a boy up by his ears for smarting off.

God, if you crossed him and did wrong-headed acts, like the unforgivable sin, which never did get clarified for us.

Polio, which might make you get put in an iron lung where you could never do anything again except be sad.

Germs, which seemed to be mostly on money, apples, and in the dirt outside.

Neighborhood boys who asked girls to do certain things they knew were wrong even though they did not know why.

And boys in cars (apparently boys on foot or on bicycles were not nearly so dangerous). Later I was to find out that this particular worry of my mother's was very real.

Alcohol, which had wrecked more lives than anything and which would send you to hell faster than you could possibly imagine.

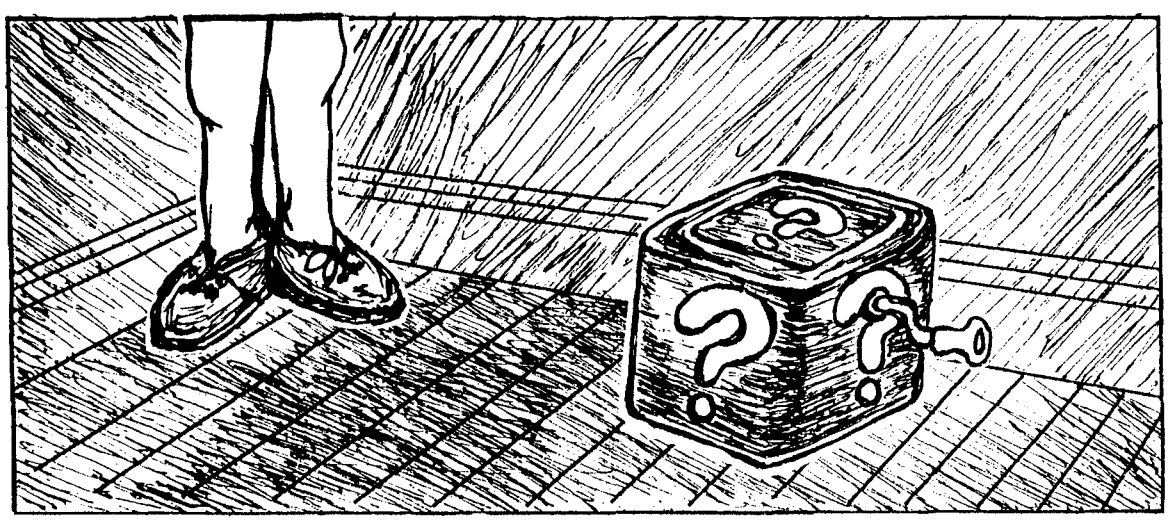
Water—lots of it, as in lakes like the one where Mama's cousin drowned when he fell out of a boat long before we were born.

Fog—I almost forgot fog, which I should not have since one night Johnny Joe Harrison made me drive his car eighty miles an hour through pea soup fog. He did not know I was blind without my glasses and I was too scared after I started driving to say I could not see but not too scared to hang on to the steering wheel and pray that the road would not curve.

Strange dogs—One had bitten a friend years before and she still had a terrible scar on her face which she would never be rid of and which effectively shut her out of ever being "Miss Anything" either.

Going in a Catholic church—Nobody knew for sure how this would hurt you because there were no Catholic churches anywhere near, but if there had been, some of us probably would have tested our luck.

This is what I remember about what might hurt you but I am older now and I know what Mama and I left off our lists—husbands. She had no way of knowing not all husbands were like Daddy. I had to find that out for myself. □



DAL TROYER

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■

Breakfast

A Story by Sherrie Flick

The chickens were scratching quietly in the yard. Mother and Evan had only the smell of fresh brewed coffee. They had only the noise of Evan's TV in the den.

"Evan, turn off the TV, please."

"Why?"

"Mother wants to hear the chickens, Evan."

"You can't hear the chickens from in here. Go outside." Evan's thin voice carried like tangled yarn down the hallway.

Mother sighed and raised her hands above her head, beseeching some other-worldly power. She leaned back in her chair until her fingers touched the yellow wallpaper. She scratched softly at its tweedy texture.

"Chickens," she said softly, "Chickens are not what I want. I want eggs."

Mother tipped her chair forward, "Evan! Mother wants eggs!" She stood up to re-fill her stained coffee cup.

"Okay, Mother. Eggs. Over hard. Right up. They're coming right the heck up."

Evan adjusted his glasses and pulled on the elastic band of his sweats. He turned off the TV and straightened a stack of ten *TV Guides* into a nice, neat pile like a skyscraper on the coffee table. He reconsidered and fanned them in a long, neat line.

Evan lived with his mother because he was sixteen. He knew with all certainty he would leave the house just as soon as his eighteenth year presented itself. He felt as if he was pacing—gradually training his body in a sort of patience that would come in handy some time in his future.

"Eggs, not chickens, right Mother?"

Mother grunted from across the room. She was doing toe-touches. She did two hundred every day. She said it was discipline. She usually stood up and simply said, "Discipline." Then she dove to it—bending and touching and grunting when spoken to.

Evan lit the burner on the stove with one deft flick of the match. He plopped a heavy skillet down along with a dollop of butter.

He starting singing in a high operatic voice, "Eggs! Eggs! Eggs! Mother will have eggs!"

Mother stopped, panting, and sang in one slow note, "Bacon . . ."

Evan sang, "She will have eggs and she will have bacon too!"

He swung open the refrigerator door and pulled out a cardboard flat of eggs, then he rummaged for the thin, cellophaned bacon. He hummed, "Eggs. Eggs. Eggs."

Mother said, "Evan we must *do* something today. Let's do something kind and dandy."

Evan said, "People do not say *dandy* anymore, Mother."

Mother said, "Oh."

Mother sat down in a kitchen chair. It creaked slightly under her weight. She put her elbows on the sturdy wooden table and began tapping her feet: toe-heel-toe-heel.

The chickens were interesting her again.

Evan looked cautiously through his greasy bangs, in his mother's direction. He moved his eyes as far as he could without actually moving his head. He reached for his crotch and rubbed in a quick, circular motion. He pushed at his bangs then swiftly and adeptly flipped the eggs by jerking on the pan's handle. He did the same with the bacon which was in a separate pan.

"Bacon is better in the microwave, Evan."

"Microwaves frighten me more than any other appliance, Mother. I want my day to be as vacant from stress as possible, please."

He knew he needed to overcome his microwave paranoia—but that would be in later years. One thing at a time, he liked to tell himself in so many words.

"Let's be bleeding heart liberals today, Evan. I want to be a bleeding heart liberal," Mother said.

Overall, Evan was pleased with his breakfast. He used two bright blue plates to offset the egg yolks. He Xed the bacon alongside and went into the front yard for a few chicken feathers as a comical garnish. His mother laughed and laughed after he put the plates down. Evan felt the stirrings of success begin deep down in the soles of his itchy, dry, callused feet.

"Okay. Let's be bleeding hearts today."

"We must gas the car and clothe the body," Mother said, "We must exit the house before father returns at two. Father is a bore. He will not see the fun in any of this."

Evan cleaned up the plates and cups—poured himself some more coffee and headed up the stairs for a very quick shower. He decided he would not masturbate today. At the top of the stairs, he reconsidered. He would masturbate, but only with quick, purposeful strokes. One. Two. Three. Splat. He knew what he wanted and with determination he knew he could get anything.

When she heard Evan's shower begin, Mother reached behind the microwave for her cigarettes. She giggled and stepped out the side door. She was hit full on with gigantic chicken smell and sound. With a slow, decisive stroke she lit a match and held it to her cigarette. She inhaled deeply all the smoke and chicken she could fit.

She exhaled slowly, "Life is so good," she said to the pecking monsters, "You just tell me, little guys; how in the hell did life get so good?" □

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Olena Kalytiak Davis

All the Natural Movements of the Soul

the swan dive
the back flip
the jack knife

the way it wants to lean over things—

I was bent over my poems
like some crazy mother. Dinner was burning
on the floor. Yes, the distinct smell
of piss. Not much washing
but the spinning, the rinsing,
the sad steam of those who launder hung
in the air, there were slots for quarters,
they were the sockets of my eyes.

I don't want to blame anyone, but somehow:

the situation is always grave.

Then one afternoon, everything goes into remission.

Then there are whole days when nothing happens,
when I start asking simple questions like:

in what do you believe?

The way the soul wants
to lean over things,
the way the soul wants to leave

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■

the way it wants to write
another lunch poem
it wants to protect itself
it wants to become famous
all at the same time.

There were whole day-long days,
summer days like grace notes:

the trill of being high on a porch
that wrapped itself around the stars.
We sat around trying to name
the things that do not exist.
We sat there wanting to touch
everything again and again, only this time
we would be blindfolded, our arms ribboned
behind our backs, using only our tongues.

I thought: please don't grow
familiar. I think I said it out loud:
Please don't let me love you
that horrible way.

The situation is grave:

the way we lean over each other, the way years
later we emerge: hunchbacked, hooded,
with full grown tender things called souls.

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The Parkway

We've got two seasons here," he'd heard ever since he was a kid growing up in the neighborhood, "winter and road repair," and never had that seemed more true than this year. No sooner had the last, dirty-white dregs of winter been flushed down the storm sewers by the spring rains than the heavy equipment started rolling in. There was ample warning—stacks of orange barricades waiting to be deployed, signs several blocks in either direction on Stillman Parkway announcing that it would be closed beginning May 10th—but it was only when he was awakened at six that Monday morning by the roar of the big trucks, by compressors chugging into the early quiet of the neighborhood and jackhammers clanging abruptly to life, that it took on a reality for him.

By seven he was standing at the end of his driveway, twin parallel strips of cracked concrete with scattered patches of grass struggling to stay alive between them, talking to his next door neighbor, Mort Kaminsky, who was on his way to work, about the tide of dirt and noise rolling their way. Mort and his wife both parked their cars in the street in front of their house because their garage, which faced the alley like most in the neighborhood, was an ancient dilapidated thing, much too small for most cars, useful only for storing snow blowers and lawn mowers and yard equipment. His own garage, barely large enough for even his small Escort but at least well maintained, was one of the few on the block with a driveway to the street.

"It's always like this, Mr. Gall," Mort was saying. "Always has been, always will be."

"Go on, Mort," he said, "what would you know?" Mort was a young businessman, mid-thirties, built like an athlete, newest guy on the block, with his doctor wife and two little kids sure to be off to the suburbs in another couple of years. Over the past decade or so the neighborhood had become a sort of way station, Gall thought, a stopover for young families on their upwardly mobile journey; he hardly knew anyone on the block by name anymore.

"Just ask my dad," said Mort.

Gall, a thin man, remembered Mort's dad, glumly. He'd gone to school with Mort's dad. But Mort's dad had been dead for half a dozen years already, so what was this "ask my dad" stuff? Was it some sort of figure of speech? He didn't *get* figures of speech, usually. Usually, when he asked his wife to explain one to him, he didn't get the explanation either. It seemed like a lot of extra work to him, when you could just say how something was, straight out. So did what was going on along the parkway, down there at the end of the block, a perfectly serviceable street so far as he could tell, already in the process of being ripped up, a poor butchered thing with its guts being laid open even as he watched, great bloody wet globs of red clay spilling up through gashes in the dark asphalt.

"I'm gonna call my councilman," he told Mort.

"Woman, Mr. Gall," said Mort. "Council-*woman*."

"You think so?"

As Mort headed off in his shiny new Jeep, Gall—wondering what you called these things now, *vehicles* was it?—strolled up the walk toward his own front porch. The lawn was looking good for so early in the season. The crocus bulbs he'd buried in it the first fall after his retirement had bloomed and been cut back already. He loved that look, the little blue flowers popping up when there were still clumps of snow in shady spots around the house; he'd admired it for years whenever he'd driven through the classy part of town nearby that was famous for its yards and gardens, and now he had it himself. The thick grass had greened up nicely and was darkening richly now, thriving on the high-nitrogen fertilizer he'd spread a week ago. The shrubs around the foundation were thickly leaved already, even the hostas at their base that had looked so burnt at the end of last summer were coming up bright and strong, and the double petunias he'd planted in the window boxes around the porch over the weekend were beginning to open their first pink buds.

But down at the end of the block, just three houses away, two guys in ragged gray coveralls were shutting things down. Almost as soon as Mort's red Jeep had paused at the stop sign and skittered across the intersection, they had begun setting up a string of orange barricades, ugly things, like overgrown sawhorses, across his street, West Worthington Avenue, and cutting off his access to Stillman. Stillman, named for an early settler best known for his paranoid fear of the peaceable Indian tribes who fished and hunted in the region, ran north-south; West Worthington ran east-west, straight out from the center of the city but ending only a block and a half farther west, where a deep, overgrown cut slashed diagonally across the neighborhood, leaving him now with only little Agmont Street, narrow and deeply potholed, for egress.

Fucked, he told himself, wondering, at the same time, just when he'd started using language like that; Margaret would be appalled.

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CTION ZONE

Alvin Greenberg

The cut had been the center of controversy for the past couple of years, and one evening the winter before last he'd actually gone to a community meeting sponsored by the City Council, where there was considerable heated discussion concerning the future of what he was amused to hear them calling the Elementary Canal. He suspected that he alone among the small crowd there was historian enough to remember that it had indeed once been a canal, built in the mid-nineteenth century to barge goods into the center of the city, which, because of Stillman's never-ending fear of Indian marauders sneaking up on his encampment by canoe, had not initially been located directly on the river. Originally known as Alemakers Canal because of the many barges that used it to supply grain to the local breweries, from the very beginning the newspapers, noting how it fed raw materials into the great industrial maw of the burgeoning city, referred to it as the Alimentary Canal, and eventually, as it fell into disuse in the first decades of the twentieth century, it came to be know as the Gut Cut.

Dried out now, choked with brush and weeds and the detritus of long-abandoned hobo camps, it had become a nearly impenetrable thicket where Gall had often taken a dog he once owned, a little black and white mutt, to scare up rabbits. But that was years ago, when he used to like to go for an evening walk after he came home from work; the dog had disappeared one summer—run away, been stolen, hit by a car on some distant street, who knew?—and Gall, who found himself somehow oddly relieved, had never gotten another one or walked in the Cut again. Now only kids—kids from other neighborhoods, he suspected—used it, mostly for late night beer parties, smoke from their campfires sometimes visible on warm evenings from his front porch, and no one knew its real name any more, though it amused Gall to think how, in an odd way, the beer-drinking kids had returned it to its original use.

But concern had grown. Several times each summer the fire department was forced to hack its way through the thicket to extinguish brush fires. Neighbors called it a nuisance, feared it was attracting a drug-using, criminal element, and wanted it turned into a park. A consortium of developers was proposing building either a strip mall or an enclosed townhouse community. The school board was showing signs of interest. One council member had vigorously promoted the idea of turning it into a limited access road connecting with the major interstate highway that ran through the city, but no one understood who it would serve or what its other end would be connected to. Studies had been done, factions formed, for a year now a court-ordered moratorium had been in effect. Gall was convinced that, like himself, hemmed in by age and construction, it was going nowhere.

The Road

On Memorial Day, in mid-morning, Gall's wife, Margaret, whose asthma had never been worse, threw her dust rag into the kitchen sink and announced that she was going to live with her sister in San Francisco until this mess was finished.

"It never stops," she said, and Gall, who had just come inside for a drink of water, knew she was talking not about her cough but about the dust, which seemed to follow her around the house like some malevolent child, smudging tabletops, dressers, cabinets with its dirty fingers as soon as she was finished wiping them clean. They kept the doors and windows closed, but even so the kitchen counter was perpetually gritty, clothes fresh from the dryer were already dusty, their throats and noses dry and stuffy. He himself had been working outside for the past two days, loosening the garden soil choked and compacted with cement dust, moving the sprinkler around to wash the pore-clogging grit from the drooping leaves of grass and shrubs and flowers. His own throat was bone-dry and scratchy.

The only good thing he could think of was how quiet it had been for going on two days, a Sunday and now a holiday Monday. The rest of the time it was endless noise and dirt. The crews began work at six in the morning, and it had gotten so he was always awake now even before they started, lying in bed waiting for the first explosive roar of the big diesel shovels, the muffled rumble of the backhoes grinding into action, knowing the next things he was going to hear were Margaret's harsh, hacking cough and her daily anger. And now that the days had gotten longer they worked into the fading light, till seven or sometimes eight, so that Gall and his wife, finally succumbing to the roar of heavy machinery ripping up the fabric of their day hour after hour, tearing the quiet of the neighborhood to shreds, pulverizing their peace of

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mind and shrieking relentlessly on into the soft spring evenings, had abandoned all attempts at dinner table conversation. And Saturdays—they worked Saturdays as well!—Gall thinking that no doubt this was because they had bonus incentives to complete the project on schedule, but all they were ever doing, he saw on his daily stroll down to the corner at Stillman, was tearing up, ripping open the street for as far as he could see in both directions, smashing curbstones and sidewalks, excavating buried sewer and water pipes covered with red clay and rust, dredging ever deeper, leaving great, gaping, water-logged gulches in the middle of the street and mountains of thick red mud at every corner.

So of course he agreed that it was the right thing for her to do, this temporary move to the west coast, but when she urged him to come with her—"You don't need this any more than I do, Marvin"—he balked. He refilled his glass from the kitchen tap, swirled the water around in it, dumped it out—they had long since gotten in the habit of rinsing off everything in the kitchen, every dish, glass, cup, pot, utensil, before they used it—and filled it again for a long drink.

"Can't," he said, sliding his empty glass back down onto the counter, feeling, hearing, the grit crunching beneath it. "Can't leave the house, Margaret, not with all this going on. Someone's got to be here."

And Gall was that someone. Self-nominated, a volunteer, not a martyr, but maybe, to his way of thinking, a guardian of sorts, a holder-down-of-the-fort, a watcher-out for the barbarians at the gates, the captain, sometimes, of a sinking ship, alone on the bridge as she foundered in heavy, storm-swept seas, relieved that passengers and crew were safely away, bound to his duty.

Two or three times a week he got a postcard from Margaret, safe on her distant, sunny shore. The messages were brief, cheery, uninformative; the cards showed pictures of blue skies, blue waters, craggy headlands, great golden bridges. On Saturdays at mid-morning—early still where she was—she called, chatted with him while she sat sipping coffee on the high balcony of her sister's hillside condo, exclaiming over the white sails on the bay. Sometimes, though, the noise of the construction equipment, ripping up the asphalt on Spense Road now, the east-west street just north of their house, was so loud he could barely hear her. He kept thinking he should tell her to call on Sundays instead, but he had so come to relish the Sunday quiet in the neighborhood that he found he didn't even want to talk to anyone then.

The Street

Standing on his front porch one Sunday morning, he saw the Kaminskys next door at work packing the Jeep. He hadn't had his own car out of the garage for weeks now, except to pull it out in the driveway now and then to hose off the dust. He'd taken to walking to the grocery store, up Worthington, over Agmont, then just a block further west on Spense, where at least the sidewalks were still intact even if the street was mostly chewed up, not really a problem, especially on a pleasant summer afternoon, except for the constant cloud of dust in the air. He was looking at his drooping, windowbox petunias, which were dying in spite of his daily efforts to keep them watered and clean, when Mort came out of the house with a pair of sleeping bags under each arm, a pair of kids at his heels.

"Making an escape," Gall said, strolling over to where Mort was stuffing the bags into the back of the Jeep, begging his kids for a little patience. He meant to tell Mort that the councilwoman had never even bothered to return his call.

"Oh, hey, Mr. Gall, how're you doing? No, we've had this camping trip planned since last winter."

"Good timing all the same, I'd say."

"Well, yeah, that took some effort, Ginny and I matching up our vacation time. I see Mrs. G's off on vacation now too."

"What I meant," said Gall, sweeping his arm out toward the mess on the corner, the barricades, the great bloody trench where the Stillman Parkway traffic had used to run, the ten foot high mound of drying red mud, "was all this."

Mort squeezed the last bag into place, slammed the back hatch tight on it, looked up and said, "Hey, it's no big deal, just a job that had to be done sooner or later, might as well get it over with now," but Gall barely heard him. Turning back from his gesture of disgust he'd suddenly noticed, down at the far end of the block, the intersection with Agmont Street, stacked up against the dying old elm in front of the big corner house where Doosie Golfman's widow Elise still lived all by herself, a dozen or more orange barricades like those that blocked off his own end of the street.

Go, he wanted to say to Mort. Get out of here. Make a break for it while you still can. But while he was standing there thinking about it, the four Kaminskys were piling cheerily into the Jeep, rolling down the windows to wave goodbye to him, wheeling away down the street, around the corner at Agmont, past the stacked barricades, out of sight.

The Alley

Monday morning there were no cars on the street. Gall, up and about even earlier than usual—he could see the road crew just starting to arrive on the job—was reading one of the signs taped to trees and lamp posts along the

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street advising of its closing, when the newspaper carrier, a short, balding, middle-aged man Gall only knew by his first name, Walt, came trudging down the sidewalk with a bundle of papers in his arms.

"Morning, Mr. Gall," he said, too cheerily to Gall's way of thinking, "got some bad news for you, I'm afraid."

"Nothing but bad news around here," Gall groused.

Walt handed him his paper and said, "Well, if no news is good news then maybe I got some good news for you, because what I gotta tell you is, after this, no more news. Can't get through. Can't do it all on foot. Gotta suspend home delivery."

"Well," Gall consoled both himself and Walt, "I guess I'll have to get my paper from the box up at Stillman and Spense."

"'Fraid not," said Walt, moving on down the street. "They took that away when the sidewalk got ripped up. Diner's closed, too." He waved, then added, "Must be nice, not having all that traffic noise around here."

Well, thought Gall, heading back inside, paper in hand, to make his morning coffee, I never did eat there anyway. And folks always complained that it brought the wrong sort of people into the neighborhood. Not that he saw a lot of his neighbors these days; there were times lately when, if it weren't for a few lights he noticed on in the evenings, he might have thought that he was the only one still living on the block. It made him wonder if perhaps he had somehow become the wrong sort of people. He stopped for a moment on the porch, noticing that the barricades were up now at the far end of the street, hearing the heavy engines roaring into action out of sight over on Spense. There were already dirt stains, vague gray smudges, on his clean white shirt and clean khakis, fresh out of the laundry last night.

He had taken to doing several loads of wash a day. He couldn't stand climbing into gritty sheets at night, wearing the same dusty shirt and pants a second time, even looking at the smudged towels. The second load was on its rinse cycle when Gall, upstairs in the kitchen, heard a terrible grinding sound, then an agonizing metallic shriek as the machine shut down. He hurried down to the basement, though he knew it was no use; the constant struggle with the hard, granular dirt that Gall had to wipe from the bottom of the washer's tub after every load had finally gotten into the motor, burned out the bearings, and what were the chances of getting a repair truck into the neighborhood now? Standing in his damp basement, pulling dripping, tangled sheets out of the still full tub, Gall could feel the whole house shaking around him under the pounding of the heavy construction equipment. In the morning light slanting in through the window wells he could see a fine gray powder sliding down the cinder block foundation walls. From upstairs, he heard the doorbell chime.

By the time he got up there Johnson, the half-senile old mailman who regularly left mail in the wrong boxes, as if it didn't matter who got what, was already halfway down the block, and the mail, as usual, was half in the box, half on the porch floor though at least, today, all addressed for him, aside from the large white piece marked "Postal Customer." He sat down on the wicker porch chair and studied Margaret's postcard, unable to figure out what all that green stuff in the picture was until he turned it over and read that she'd been to the arboretum. He put aside what looked to be a couple of bills and opened the folded notice from the Postal Service. It informed him that delivery was being suspended due to lack of access; his mail would be held at the post office designated below, to be picked up at his convenience; the post office designated below, Gall knew without looking, was a good two miles away. He let the notice fall to the floor and opened the quarterly statement from his garbage collection service, Dirty Dan's, which apologized for the fact that his weekly garbage pick-up was being suspended until further notice because the alley behind his house, where he always set out the cans, was being closed off at both ends. Piss Alley indeed, he thought, because that was what he'd heard the neighborhood kids call it though it didn't have any official city designation. Dirty Dan didn't suggest what he might, at his convenience, do with his garbage. What looked to be a bill from the Water Department was yet another notice, advising him that road construction in his neighborhood would require that water service be shut off for certain yet-to-be-determined periods, perhaps as much as a day at a time. When the phone rang he knew at once that it wouldn't be his councilwoman calling back, though he'd left several messages by now, but the phone company itself, or the electric utility, or the gas . . . . By the end of the day he was right on all counts.

The Avenue

It had been a month or more—who knew?—maybe two, since Gall had received a postcard from Margaret, almost as long since they'd spoken. Two miles to the P.O.! He wasn't about to walk that, especially with the sidewalks ripped up, the intersections impassable mountains of mud, heavy equipment roaring away far down below what had once been street level, gouging, pumping, dredging, shifting, tamping, hauling, god help you if you tumbled down into that. Late in the evenings—already it was getting dark earlier, but they worked on under floodlights mounted on flatbeds the tractors hauled in—or on Sundays, when they fell silent,

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the post office was of course closed. Were the postcards piling up there, he wondered, or had she long since quit sending them? And the telephone service was so intermittent Margaret had given up calling out of frustration. Even when she could get through, half the time they were cut off in mid-conversation; the rest was static or other people talking right over them, Gall couldn't believe the sorts of things people said to each other over the phone these days and Margaret didn't want to hear them.

Neither did he want to tell her about the state of the house, his clothes, himself. When water was available he took a quick shower, rinsed out a few socks, some underwear, in the bathroom sink, hung them over the shower curtain to dry, put them on stiff and gritty. He'd given up watering outside; the grass was patchy brown, the shrubbery wilted, the petunias dead. He'd tried dusting a few times a week, but the stuff just shuffled itself up into the thick air of the house, hung miserably there through the hot afternoon, then resettled on furniture, countertops, windowsills, even himself—his thin hair felt permanently thickened with . . . something. It wasn't pleasant. The two garbage cans he kept beside the garage had filled quickly, and the alley was slowly becoming clogged with plastic bags, mostly his; he couldn't understand why it wasn't the same for his neighbors, how they were dealing with this, where they'd gone, how long their summer vacations could last. In the late summer heat the alley had begun to stink, to truly earn its name, Gall thought, but in the house his nose was always so clogged with dust he couldn't smell a thing. He assumed it was late summer from the heat. With the electricity on one day, off the next, the clocks screwy, the TV zapped by power surges, no paper delivery, he had no firm sense of what month it was, what day, what time of day. Sunday was the day the ruckus in the street paused for a while—the pounding and screeching and rumbling, the horrible shrill beeping of the back-up warnings—and Monday, or morning, or dawn, before dawn even some days now, was when it started up again.

When he thought of Margaret he had a hard time calling an image of her face or the sound of her voice to mind. Would he recognize her voice on the phone if she were to call again, be able to pick her out from the tangle of speakers on the crossed lines? He scrounged around in his desk drawers one morning, the ratty wooden desk that was the one thing he'd salvaged from his office when he retired, till he found all the postcards she'd sent him, but the messages were like empty vessels, dried out, dusty, containing nothing of her, and the pictures on the reverse sides, all of which he recalled with great clarity—the shiny black seals, the red-gold bridge, the stark island prison—seemed far more vivid and alive than any Margaret he could summon up. How could this be: that they'd lived together for forty-seven years and now clumps of trees he'd never actually laid eyes on in person—eucalyptus, redwood, acacia—seemed more real than she did? It was enough to make a fellow doubt his own reality.

Especially with no one around to confirm it. The Kaminskys had never returned. His councilwoman never returned his calls. He saw no one on the block though he often stood on his open porch or out on the sidewalk for an hour or more at a time, tolerating the worst of the heat and noise just for a glimpse of some neighbor he didn't even know by name. But their doors and windows stayed shut, and he could only assume they were gone or, like him, cowering inside most of the day. Still, you'd think they'd come out for a breath of air after dark, when things quieted down, when they'd eaten supper and could relax a bit. Gall's own meals were quick and frugal. He had a pantry full of food he'd stocked up on when he could still make the walk to the grocery easily—canned goods, soups, noodles, dried beans, toastables and microwavables—but no appetite. Everything tasted of dirt, even the soup. Sometimes he left his dinner uneaten on the kitchen table and walked down to the corner where the workmen were still at it under the violent blue glare of the floodlights, hoping that one of them would look up at him from down in the trench where they were wrangling huge concrete pipes into place and acknowledge his presence, the fact that there was still someone up there on the avenue. But all he ever saw were the ribbed orange tops of hard hats.

Was it September—October?—the morning Gall awoke in his living room, later than he'd slept in months, from a horrendous dream of earthquakes, thinking suddenly of Margaret—and how long had it been since he'd thought of her at all?—perched with her fragile china coffee cup on the high, overhanging balcony of her sister's condo on a steep hillside overlooking that distant, precipitous shore? Weeks ago he'd given up sleeping in his bed upstairs, doing nightly battle with gritty sheets and dust-filled pajamas, and taken to sleeping on the couch, rarely even bothering to get out of his clothes, what was the point, they were soiled as soon as he got up anyway. Sitting on the edge of the couch, running his fingers through his thin hair, over his crusty scalp, feeling about with his feet for the old pair of sandals he'd kicked off last night, he couldn't shake the dream, the sudden, nightmarish shifting of the earth and the roar it set up, the thunder of tumbling cement and crashing of twisted metal, rockslides, mudslides, the great plates of the earth grinding angrily against each other. Minutes passed, the whole world still tumbling down about his head, before he realized that it wasn't the Pacific coast crumbling but his own West Worthington Avenue.

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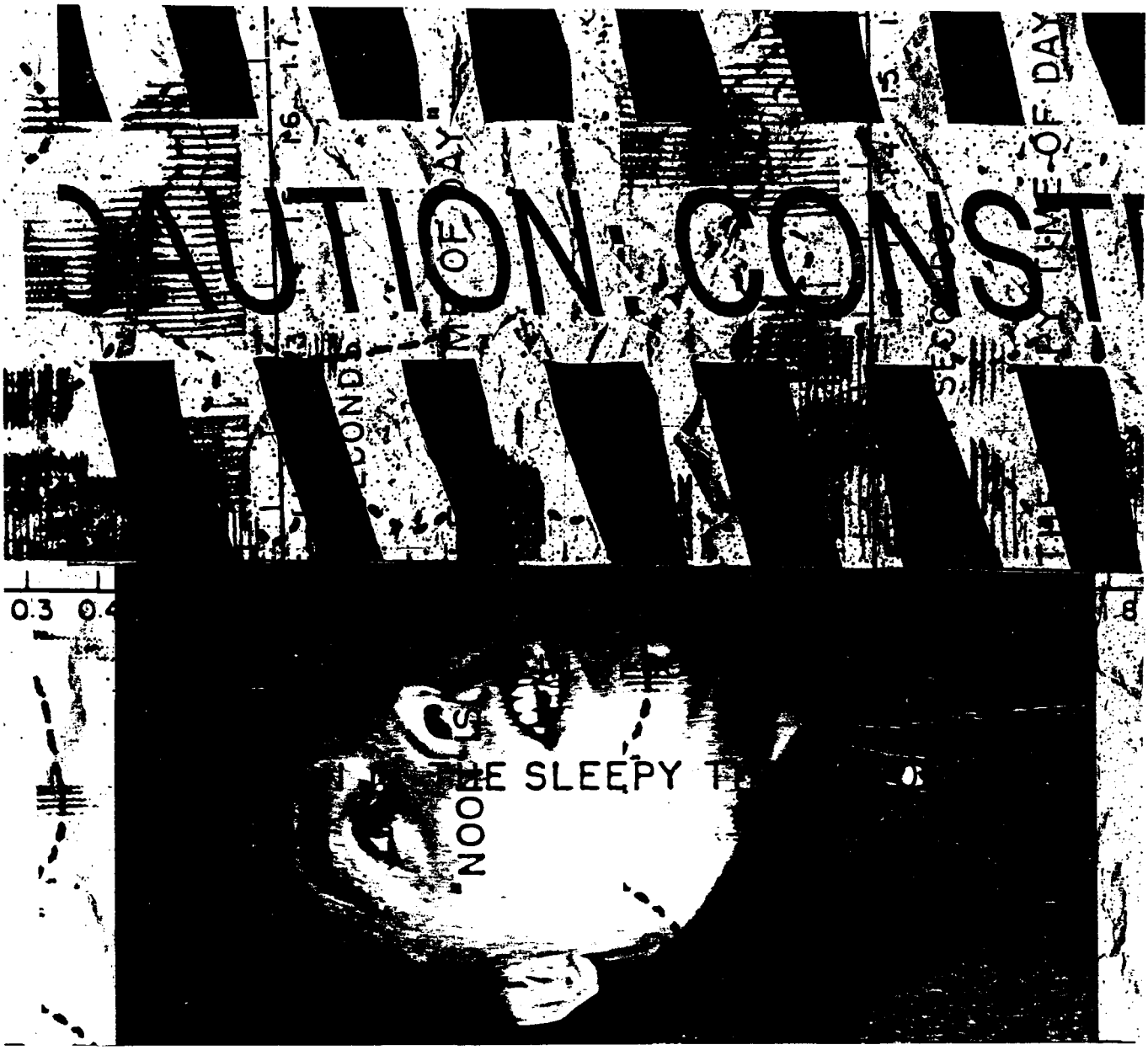

OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

By the time Gall got to the porch the street looked like the parking lot for an earth moving equipment company. Enormous, bright orange dump trucks, as shiny as if they had just come from the factory, lined the opposite side, and at each end of the street a gigantic machine was slowly chewing up the asphalt while a front loader trundled along behind it, shoveling up the thick hunks of gray-black tar clotted with dripping masses of red clay and avalanching them into the back of a dump truck waiting with its heavy engine rumbling. The air was thick with dust and truck exhaust and diesel fumes and the beep-beep-beep of the next empty truck backing into position with a grinding of gears, and then with the thump of metal tread on concrete. Gall, standing motionless on his front porch, looked up. It was a bulldozer grunting right down the sidewalk on his side of the street from the corner at Agmont, flipping aside the big square paving blocks as if they were cardboard so that they landed upside down on the lawns, its one set of treads half off the walk and tearing into the burnt grass as it came onto the stretch in front of Gall's house. It paused for a moment where the walk crossed Gall's driveway, as if that were an odd configuration, something worth considering. Gall, wrapping himself in his thin, dry arms, watched as the operator leaned his hard-hatted head out, looked down, and then, starting the dozer up again, straightened in his seat, glanced toward the house, caught Gall's eye momentarily as the heavy machine groaned forward now, ripping up sod and cement, and tossed Gall a quick salute. □

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Virtual Gold

PERRY GLASSER

BEFORE A BACKDROP of five media screens lies a set, a dreamscape festooned with what pretend to be spiraling molecules, but seem like nothing so much as Tinker Toys hung by a not very skilled Brobdignagian child. Overhead, laser green and blue strobe lights slash the air, and all of us are drilled by omnipresent sound, its source unlocatable, bass so deep gonads tremble. Instead of Bill Gates, richest man in the world and CEO of Microsoft Corp., you wonder if maybe you wandered smack into a hot 1967 San Francisco Friday night. That would explain it. You're at the Fillmore, Jerry's out front jammin' on what has to be the fifteenth chorus of "Sugar Magnolia," and the Airplane are in the wings. Two white tabs slippery as honey cough drops slide down your throat, and you are seriously set for a serious evening that will seriously change your life and all the universe with it. But then you look at the SRO crowd, you see the white shirts, the nerd packs with red, blue and black pens, the small briefcases, the cellular telephones, the pagers hooked over worn brown belts, and know you are among more than 600 exhibitors and 5,000 paying customers and maybe 300 press guys crammed into this hushed room, awaiting the keynote from the Harvard drop-out who rules an empire from a corporate HQ they unblushingly call a *campus* in Redmond, Washington, and you think Holy Christ, Fillmore nothin'! It's April, 1996 and it's the InterOp NetWorld Trade Show in God-help-us Las Vegas, Nevada.

Rumor has it that Bill's empire may be in decline, ready for bread, circuses, lions and sacrificial Christians because Bill has blown it, underestimating the speed with which the Internet would grow. Rumor has it—no, in fact—Bill is getting pole-axed by a bunch of know-nothing runny-nosed kids from the University of Illinois who, a few years ago, started giving away a point-and-click Web browser, Mosaic. Just last year these same guys went public, an IPO that popped the buttons off Wall Street's pants; minutes after the market opened, the 20-somethings became 20-something billionaires. Now they are Netscape and they own 80% of the browser market, and the fact that there is a bit of software he did not develop, license, or even had a clue would be significant might be giving Bill cold night sweats. Can he be losing it? Mice nibble at the kingdom's edges. Is that a camel's nose under the edge of the tent? Hell, there's a visible comet in the heavens—what did you think? it portended evil in *Bosnia*?!

The audience has fevered eyes. For them this event is the gateway to the Gold Rush, better than a pass to the head of the Space Mountain line in Disney World. You listen hard, you can hear virtual prospectors tying cyber sled dogs into traces, ready to mush a path to the virtual Klondike. Never mind that these people have made *virtual* a synonym for *fake*, and never mind that most people on that real-time trail went bust or worse. This is the New Age, the Age of Information, the Digital Decade. Land, Labor and Capital, my sweet Marxist ass: to make a killing these days you want only enough real estate to set down your desktop, a half-baked idea that will attract enough capital to set up a web site, and maybe a fifteen-year-old kid clever enough to do it for you. You can borrow sufficient money from your Aunt Sadie and still leave enough for the old bat to retire in comfort to Orlando, and clever fifteen-year-olds drop off trees like ripe pears. In a few months—in weeks!—you'll be harvesting so much dough you'll have to ship it in wheelbarrows. Richer than Croesus! Richer than Scrooge McDuck! *Richer than Bill!*

It's the Web man, the Web. It's the Future tongue-kissing us long and slow and wet, leaving everyone in this room stiff-nippled, hard drives spinning faster than a 166 MegaHertz Pentium sucking kilobytes off an ATM ethernet pipeline hooked to a URL hypercharged with Hot Java applets. Damn! Can't you just feel it? Technogeeks Triumphant, the Revenge of the Nerds, call it whatever you want—we are going to make coin!

The house lights dim, the synthesizer wells up, and after a rambling, long introduction about a man who needs no introduction, the house lights drop us into Stygian black, the laser beams are going batty, the sourceless moan that may in fact be nothing less than Pythagoras' Music of the Spheres is becoming more weird and more loud, and then a finger of white light sharp as thought at center stage catches a man in a sedate suit and conservative tie, hair unkempt as though he's just come from a lab. It's Bill! Yes. Yes. Yes. The arc lights from the TV people wash the room, and we are applauding wildly because it is us at the Convention Center. We are here with Bill! Bill himself in a crackling corona, his image swelled 1000x on the two outermost screens behind him.

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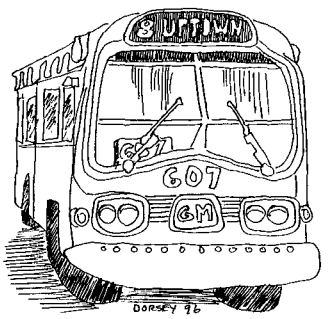
That makes sense. Of course! For this audience the flesh-and-blood Bill Gates is as unfamiliar as their wives. The Bill they know and love needs to be the smiling visage digitized onto the giant screens. Ignore that man at stage center! Observe only the digital image of the Wizard! Give us Virtual Gates!

Could there be a better time and place? This is Vegas! Fantasy and reality bleed into each other like water colors applied with no skill to glossy paper. High above the shadowy streets of New York City in towers of glass may be the ideal offices in which to scheme and plot, but Vegas is where you come to dream the impossible. In the middle of the Nevada desert we're unburdened by anything as complex as history, not counting the small memorial in the gardens behind the Flamingo Hotel dedicated to the city's visionary founding father, Bugsy Siegel. Bugsy never killed anyone unless the person absolutely needed killing, and Bugsy was played by Warren Beatty, just an excited, overgrown kid, so now you understand Vegas. Dreams? Man, only a mile or two down the Strip is MGM's Emerald City, a hotel and casino whose lobby features a place for new style visionaries and old style alcoholics, the Flying Monkey Bar. You want dreams? This is Vegas! That's what they sell! We are at this very moment in the Convention Center beside the Las Vegas Hilton where they are building a Star Trek show in the lobby, sacrificing thousands of square feet that might have held more slot machines for a permanent feature that will with sequins, tits and feathers depict the future as we know it will be, must be, because we are building it that way. Arm the photon torpedoes! Warp Nine, Mr. Sulu! Our mission is to go where no man has gone before.



But Gates turns out to be a disappointment. Okay, we knew that had to happen that way. The richest man in the world hasn't much to say that doesn't sound like an infomercial. You long for a remote, some way to change the station. Get that talking head off the screen! This is too much like miserable insomnia at some Holiday Inn in Nebraska. Microsoft will do this and Microsoft will do that, and if you are in the business you need to know what the 800-pound gorilla of the software industry plans, but the press stops taking notes. Pens click; steno pads slap closed. They've heard this before, news so old you can read it in *USA Today*'s green section. The media screens flicker and flash with frame after frame of Bill's light-and-dog-and-virtual-pony-show, and—give the guy credit—it is a brave new world that will have such creatures in it, a world wired so tight that all of us, from bushmen in the Outback to sherpas in the Himalayas can engage in electronic commerce with L. L. Bean or each other, a world in which an image transmitted from, say, the Veldt to a satellite and down to Rochester, Minnesota will bounce back again complete with a diagnosis from the Mayo Clinic—all while the patient lies open on the table, a world where senior citizens can board a bus without exact change but can pay their fare just by sliding a prepaid smart card through a card reader. There's progress for you. Don't tell me about the global village; tell me about vending machines that will roll out all the soda pop I can stand and debit my bank balance automatically. Coins jingle when you walk, and a pocketful of change can really mess up the line of a good suit.

After Gates is finished, you shuffle out the door, briefly through sunshine and into the exhibition hall. What is this about? You wonder where and how the technology intersects with imagination for the sixty thousand paying customers who will cram the Convention Center these four days, flowing past exhibits that feature pocket billiard champions, folk singers, tight-rope walkers—all huckstering for megacorporations with balance sheets larger than the budget of most third world countries. That's a cliché, but in this hall it is no joke. This is Big Business, it simply doesn't get any bigger. Cynical thoughts of doom and civilization's end are cheap shots that come in flocks beneath the neon nights of Las Vegas. Still, as you stroll among them you feel it in the close air, beyond it all, past the hysteria, you can't escape it, can't evade it, can't deny it, can't avoid it—these guys (and they are mostly guys) share a kind of boyish excitement you last felt in high school. Remember? You were invulnerable, would never err, and were dedicated to truth, justice and the American Way. Oh, certainly, plain as Dracula dropped into the cast of *La Cage aux Folles*, Greed stalks the miles of aisles of the convention floor, but in this atmosphere there is also something to envy.

These guys are sustained by a faith: they know they are midwives to the most important change to human culture since Gutenberg moved type.

Call it a paradigm shift, call it the cosmic switchboard, call it the nervous system of the planet, call it whatever you want—how many other people do you know that without glassy-eyed New Age spirituality, without dope, without blind Born Again tent-meeting skull-numbing protestations of Christ's special favor, or without so much as a 12-step program, are able to bend forward and drink deep from the spring of pure Optimism?

TO SHARE THAT OPTIMISM, to taste its clarity on your jaded palate, you first have to understand the Internet and where it stands in terms of its own development. Don't drop this magazine! I swear, you don't even need a slide rule.

Come instead with me to ancient Pompeii, where someone just recently has invented this really terrific labor-saving device that's so cool you are kicking yourself that you did not think of it first. Yes, it's indoor plumbing. It's primitive but

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YOU'VE JUST MISSED THE FIRST SIGN OF BREAST CANCER IF YOU DIDN'T SEE THAT SMALL DOT IN THE UPPER LEFT HAND CORNER.
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effective, a system of brick and mortar and clay aqueducts and cisterns that runs fresh water from the mountains down through your villa and carries waste water out eventually to sea. You sit in the shade of the trellis of your vineyard, chew an olive grown in your arbor, stare up at the wisp of smoke above Vesuvius, and wonder: does it get any better than this?

It does. It does.

One fine afternoon you glance into the aqueduct and there is a small, blue glass perfume bottle floating by; you grab it, open it, but instead of perfume you find a coiled bit of papyrus with an inked message on it from your pal upstream. He has sent you a lewd joke, the old one about the aging courtesan, the slave boy, and the burro. Though you know the joke (who doesn't?), you laugh at your neighbor's cleverness, and you immediately pen a similar message to your neighbor downstream, reseal the bottle, and drop it into the water. Pretty soon, sending messages through the plumbing is all the rage in Pompeii—it's taking on the dimensions of a fad—and the populace is demanding a means to send messages upstream. An engineer from Egypt figures out how to do this—it merely requires a system of pulleys and ropes that tilt long stretches of the aqueduct so water seemingly flows uphill. Those clever Egyptians—it's nice to see a benefit of the global economy, all those triremes plying the Mediterranean should come to something. A schedule of the daily intervals when the water will flow one way or the other is posted in the agora.

Within weeks this happy innovation attracts so many participants that perfume bottles are damming up aqueducts and messages are moving more slowly. Someone suggests wider aqueducts, but someone else invents larger containers made totally of cork. They start hacking sculpture into pieces that fit into these floatable cork urns with the idea that the statues may be reconstructed at the other end (and now you know where the Venus di Milo's arms got to). The demand for this service is overwhelming. It seems every slave and her sister wants access to the stream, now that sculpture is being floated at high speed through the system. You don't have to be able to read to enjoy sculpture. But these pesky cork urns clutter up even the wider aqueducts. A few patricians demand a series of pipelines that are restricted for their exclusive use, and being an impatient lot they insist the water in their network be pumped to speeds higher than gravity could ever manage, which is all well and good except that now the plumbing in their homes is springing leaks trying to accommodate pressure it was never intended to. They have the money to install better faucets and inflow mechanisms, so they get along. The rich always do.

Meanwhile, the Pompeii Water-Works Guild agrees to an addressing system enabling the various-size bottles and urns floating through the ever more complicated and extended plumbing system to find their proper destinations, and a plan for valves, locks, and gates in the system is put forward. There is talk of building a fast-flowing aqueduct to Rome, and there is concern that children are being lured into depravity by irresponsible users of the plumbing. At just about this time a few forward-thinking tradesmen risk selling their wares—wine, for example—by floating it through the system to most-trusted customers. They want the Guildsmen to agree on a standard by which payment may be floated back to them, since this sort of commerce is clearly more convenient than making monthly collection rounds by donkey cart—though all the plans have risks, as you never can tell when some dishonest soul might reach into the aqueduct and scoop up an urn or two not his own. Good-natured debate rages. How shall we improve the plumbing? Innovations swell the network—bigger aqueducts, faster streams, pumps, wells, oddly designed valves, larger faucets, encoded bottles, bigger urns—and all for a system that was never meant to do anything more than eliminate the back-breaking

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task of carrying water jugs. What new system will you adopt first? A bigger cistern? or a faster flow valve? The WaterWorks Guildsmen are making out like Aegean pirates. Whenever one of their number invents a new technology—urns that float contrary to the direction of the water flow or wider aqueducts or faster flowing water—a new industry is born. There are problems, certainly, but who could doubt that the solutions will not soon be within our grasp? This is Pompeii, for the love of the gods! What can go wrong?

YOU WANDER AMONG the booths on the exhibit floor in Las Vegas where there is not even a hint of volcanic smoke in the air. It's a bazaar. If Murray the Phoenician fresh from his caravan were to walk through the door, in minutes he'd fling out a rug and start changing drachmas for dollars. No one knows whose technology will emerge triumphant, or if none will. All anyone knows for sure is that embracing the earth is a network designed to carry electrical impulses that are the analog of sound waves through a slim copper wire. That's all it was ever meant to do. But your computer is a digital piece of equipment; it loathes analog devices. A sending modem changes digital information to analog sound waves (which is why the thing seems to scream orgasmically whenever it makes a successful connection); at the other end, a receiving modem does the reverse operation. These folks in Las Vegas are selling bigger pipelines, better pipes, exclusive pipelines, encoded pipelines, digital pipelines, more connectivity, systems that will grow, systems that can adapt to your old stuff, new stuff that only seems expensive because if you use it for a time, it will pay for itself. They may call the hardware *switchers* or *routers* or *asynchronous transfer mode* or *flying monkeys*, but rest assured, these widgets only make the plumbing do what it was never meant to do.

And for what?

A dollar, for sure. These are realists. But these engineers and designers also pursue a vision. You look around, and you realize the shape of the tomorrow they are building is familiar. You first saw it when you read Asimov or Heinlein, or watched Roddenberry and Lucas productions. That's it! These guys know that the Prime Directive respects all cultures, and they know that Evil must be resisted no matter how alluring, especially when it takes the face of Power for its own sake, because if simple men and women resist that temptation, eventually the Dark Side must yield to those who turn to the Light. The imagination of a technogeek was shaped by cultural visionaries who incidentally were making a few dollars in popular arts, so they will have perfectly synchronized voice and visual communication and a computer that responds to voice queries because Captain Kirk had that stuff. They will have virtual reality because Jean Luc Picard has a holodeck. They will have artificial intelligence because Asimov's robots respected human life. Myth and progress and dreams and glitter—all one. You want to bear in mind that the first *Enterprise* was an aircraft carrier in the Pacific, which begot Kirk's ship, which in turn begot a NASA space shuttle, which name is carried on by The Next Generation. Why not? This is Vegas!

When I ask a project development manager of a Fortune-100 company if he thinks the expense of this stuff will be the cutting edge of innovation or the cutting wedge, leaving the poor and disenfranchised ever further away from where the action is, he says softly he cannot imagine it will be so. He's an optimist. I know that. But I am surprised when he goes on and gives me an historical perspective, pointing out that the first Bibles printed by Gutenberg were expensive in their day, but that did not mean that the printed word would forever be the plaything of only the very rich. A vice-president of marketing for another company spends a meal speculating with me on what it will be like when the Internet is fully transparent—by which he means as ubiquitous to our culture as is the telephone. Kiosks in public buildings that allow Internet access for a few coins; an e-mail drop box in every hotel room, the end of long lines in government offices as citizens take for granted direct access to all the data now kept from them by bureaucratic intermediaries. Renew your driver's license, download forms, and pay your taxes from your living room after you access your bank. That's not an end to community, he says to me, but the opportunity for the creation of new ones, and when I ask him if that might also not be terrifying—communities of terrorists finding each other, of pederasts, of racists—he raises his wine glass and with absolute unabashed sincerity says, "That's the cost of freedom." □

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In the NAR upcoming:

New fiction by David Hellerstein, Yxta Maya Murray, Kyle Jarrard, Kevin Casey, Don Shea

Non-fiction by Robert Newton, Dana Wilde, Janice Emily Bowers, Trudy Dittmar

Poems by Cynthia Bosley, Ken Fontenet, and Michael Waters

and much, much more...

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Melanie

LAWRENCE STURHAHN

Melanie is a 23-year-old woman who was born in the state of Arizona. With the exception of nine months in California, she's lived in Arizona all her life. She's a student, a junior, at the University of Arizona, getting her degree in biology. She doesn't know what she's going to do with her life in the future. She's aware there is a question about there even being a future.

PARENTS

"My father's name is Mike. And my mother's name is Diane. They're divorced. My mother got married again when I was in California, was married about four years and divorced again last Christmas.

"I was sixteen when the divorce between my mom and dad happened and I think the hardest part was my father moving out. I mean, it felt like my dad was leaving my life—it was very hard.

"He sat me down, and told me 'me and your mother are getting divorced...' He explained to me that the one thing they wanted was that I didn't get excluded, or have things ruin my life, high school—and whatever. But that was the hardest part, cuz he asked me who I wanted to live with, and I said 'whoever gets this house, I wanna live with.' I wanted to avoid any kind of decision-making process.

"I have a sister who's four years older than I and she wasn't living at home, but she was around. She was...Her way of reacting to anything is to just get angry...I hide. (laughs) I run and hide, and she just gets mad. She was mad about the whole thing.

"My dad just got married again this Christmas. (laughs) How do I feel about that...? It's been interesting. My family's extremely poor at communicating. Like when I lived in California, my mom called on a Wednesday afternoon asking me how I'd feel if she got married on Friday. And I totally thought it was...I don't know...Well, she did, and I got to meet him the next Thanksgiving; we stayed at my grandparents' house.

"So, I think she did it because it was kind of like going through a second childhood kind of thing. She was really alone, and she found a man—she only knew him like two months before they got married. So, I think she did it to have someone to have fun with—to be with. She wanted a man around.

"They just recently got divorced, and I guess I sort of expected it...sort of. I never really took them very seriously. I don't know if it was because I was in denial, because I couldn't accept the fact that my mom was marrying someone besides my dad, or what. And I never thought it would...I mean the age difference, you know. It was an odd, odd situation...He was twenty-eight at the time and my mom was like forty-three... As much as I'd like to think it doesn't matter, it kinda does. It's just a strange situation, so many weird things about it. (laughs) My house I grew up in was sold while I was in California. That was a rough time...I came back and my house was gone, my mother married."

ALCOHOLISM

"I think both my parents are alcoholic. Not to a large degree, but well, an alcoholic is an alcoholic, you know. As far as worrying about it, I worry about my mom. Especially now—that she won't admit that she's been drinking a lot. When she was married she drank wine with dinner—and maybe some afterwards, but she never drank heavily. She drank often, but not all the time; now she drinks all the time.

"I used to drink a lot, but I didn't really realize it. Well— I guess I kinda realized it, but I just wouldn't admit it to myself...or even take a second look at it. But I think I started to have a problem with alcohol and even now, I'll drink. Not real heavily, just get a buzz or whatever...and start to get kind of drunk. And I'll wake up the next morning and have blackouts where I don't remember. Eight months ago, I was drinking a lot. My roommate—she drank a lot. And so of course I was with her, and she was the only person I knew, so I drank a lot too. And it got to the point where I just stopped—it was way too much. I was blacking out a lot. (laughs) Somehow I got to a level so I'll just drink a little bit, and just black out a little.

"So I try not to do it, or do it just a little. I like good beer, you know, so I'll buy a couple beers after work, just to drink 'em. But I don't really go out to get drunk. Except occasions like New Year's or someone's birthday, I'll get all liquored up. But I realize there's a definite potential for me to have an alcohol problem—I've got to get a grip on that.

"You asked about drugs, well, I smoke marijuana, and that's about it. Though I've experimented with drugs; I've learned a lot from doing drugs. Cliché as it may sound, I've really expanded my mind a lot from experimental drugs—that's the positive side of it.

"Balance is what it's all about! Anything, in life, has to be balanced. Which includes...I mean there are good drugs and bad drugs,

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you know? There are drugs that will teach you something. You use them, you learn from them—and some people abuse them, too. Like crack—I don't know if anybody learned anything from crack, and I've never done crack.

"I did cocaine in high school—and I didn't like it. (laughs) It just makes you want to do more. That's an addiction drug! I mean there's nothing about cocaine except that it gets you addicted. And people thrive on addictions these days, I think—you know?"

CALIFORNIA

"I went to California when I was... uhm...seventeen, eighteen. But it wasn't running away! I went with the intention of going to school—fresh out of high school, on my own for the first time. I partied a lot, met a lot of really really interesting people, great people that I'm still in touch with. I learned a lot that I just wouldn't have seen in school...so I don't regret that time at all. In spite of my red hair, I lived right on the beach. I was kind of a beach bum, using a lot of sun-block. (laughs)

"And then I came back, which was kind of an unfortunate thing. Well, not really unfortunate—I did need to come back, kind of step back into reality. But we had problems, me and my best friend who'd come out to live with me. We traveled a lot...Las Vegas, and other places, and got back into town late at night and found that everything that we had was gone. We didn't own much in the first place, but all of it was in my car, so we got in real late that night without getting any of our stuff out, and in the morning it was gone. Everything!

"I had two jobs but I'd quit one of them to go traveling, and the other one I needed the car to get to, so I couldn't get to it, and this made it harder to stay in California, so I moved all my stuff back to Arizona. I learned all I could from all this and moved on."

THE DESERT

"I love the desert. I love it a lot more having seen other places. Growing up here, I despised it. I couldn't understand it for what it is. I thought it was the ugliest thing I'd ever seen, and I was determined to get out of it, and then I moved to California after high school. But now that I've traveled around a bit, and seen other places, the desert's absolutely amaaazing...the plants here, and the animal life...it amazes me how they all adapt...balance, you know?

"Am I going to stay here—? It's hard to say. At least for a while, but then I have no clue at all what I'm going to be doing far ahead—no clue at all. My major is biology. And I've thought about where that's going to bring me as far as the future...I don't know. I've tried to leave here a few times, then I keep on coming back—so something tells me that I'm going to stay here. I don't know...it's really hard to say...I like it here—my family's here... there is so much out there in the desert. I camp any chance I get...go out there with the rocks, animals, trees, whatever. I walk in the desert a lot... I love being out there...I could just walk in the desert forever..."

THE CREATIVE CHILD

"I would like to think I have artistic aspirations...there are some trying to get out. Like I find myself drawing; I like to draw a lot. I've never taken any classes at all...never any formal classes in art, but I can draw a little bit. And I like music a whole lot—I play a little guitar, and I'm on this drum kick. I like drums a lot. My neighbor has this little...I don't remember the name of it...a bongo drum, or whatever. But a couple months ago we got a full-out drum set in my house. I loved that! I got my tensions out—anything I had locked up inside me. Every day I would bang away. But I don't think I'll pursue that in any serious way...I doubt it. I would like to, but I don't think I will in any serious way. It's just for fun. And I've been taking ballet for a little while—that's really fun.

"I don't really do a lot sports—or have a lot of hobbies now. I used to when I was younger, but now I'm more serious, and busy with work and school, so I'm a lot less hobby oriented. Still, you name it and I've done it at some point in my life. (laughs) I was really into biking— and then my bike got stolen. And I haven't been able to afford another one."

WOMANHOOD

"I think that males and females both have a feminine and masculine side in them. And I think in men, the feminine is repressed their whole life—they're taught not to show their feminine side. And likewise women are taught to repress their masculine nature their whole life. So, I think that it's important for both males and females to realize both their sides. I think that's really important. I love being a woman. If I was a man, I'd probably love being a man.

"I'm a feminist in the fact that I feel that women are powerful, or strong, and I think that women are incredible for the fact that they can give life—but they can't do that without men. And that's the important balance..."

THE QUANTUM

"I don't know exactly what people term to be 'new age,' but I know that everything's pretty much all energy—everybody's just energy moving. Things—you know—the universe and people and chairs and everything is all just energy. So, as far as traditional medicine goes—I think it's going in a really wrong direction—how it fixes people—by what symptoms they're feeling—by antibiotics—things like that. We need to incorporate mind and body more, realize that it starts in the mind and it's the energy...

"So, I can see some things...but I don't really know whole a lot about it. People talk about it, and I'm really interested, but I haven't read as much as I'd like to. There's a lot of books out there I'd like to read. Right now, with school, I find myself reading my biology book a lot—just reading 'the required reading.'"

MARRIAGE

"Right now I can't see myself ever getting married. I think marriage is

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a formality, an old tradition. I think that it's outdated. With the changes that this world is going through, marriage just doesn't work anymore—and maybe I'm just seeing it that way because it just doesn't work nowadays.

"But I don't think there's anything wrong with finding a person that you want to spend the rest of your life with—and having kids—and raising kids. I'm into that. I was hoping there was someone out there that I'd find that I'd fall in love with, and they would fall in love with me too. But I don't think I'll marry.

"Then, I'm still young...still wanting to be out and traveling, kind of on my own...I guess if I was with somebody who wanted to do those things with me, then I could see myself wanting to get married— So, maybe after I settle down (laughs)...I don't know, I just don't have a lot of faith in that whole thing....

"I've had my share of relationships, but not a really strong, developed long-term relationship. Not yet, and I kind of feel some lack in that. I feel that's something that I would really like...maybe, biologically, my brain's telling me that I need that now. I used to feel like I wished that I could find someone who liked me—and now I have! (laughs)

"I think I was damaged by my parents and what happened to them, damaged by how much divorce is around, how hard it is to have a relationship... I know very few people whose parents are still together, and it's really refreshing to see parents still together—loving, happy—enjoying each other. It makes me really sad to see people who are still married and unhappy, you know? I don't know...should they get divorced, or should they still know they made a commitment, and they have to stick to it—?

"It's really hard to grow up in a home where there's no love between your parents. As far as the male and female bond goes, there wasn't any love shown between my parents. And that was rough on me. It's hard for me because I didn't find myself in healthy relationships a lot, and I wasn't sure how to have one, I think...(laughs)

"I don't really do a lot of dating, not really. Its just all too weird, that whole dating thing. Because—I don't know—you meet someone, but it's hard for me to gel a line of friendship, and then develop a relationship out of that."

"But now I've started dating somebody who lives in Denver—and I'm not real sure how it's going to happen—what's going to happen...because I live in Tucson—and I'm kind of stuck here until I finish school—and he lives there and he really likes it there. He's done with Tucson. He lived here and he's gone. We were always just kind of friends when he lived here, but he had a girl friend, so we just remained friends. Then, after he moved to Denver, we started talking on the phone and when he'd come into town, he'd come over and see me...but I just never thought he was into me until...now. He likes me and I like him." (laughs)

SEXUALITY

"It would be great if you could be free in sexuality, but these days you can't. Humans are basically the only organisms that have sexual relations

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with another for reasons other than reproducing. That's beautiful...I mean that bond between two people is incredible. I don't think we should exploit it. But nowadays you can't enjoy it. Because you just don't know about the person you're having sex with... It's not only AIDS. There are so many prevalent diseases out there...it's amazing...it's scary, it's horrible..."

FRIENDSHIP

"I've got several male friends who mean so much to me, and who I can identify with, who I can have a great time with. We'll laugh and cry—and whatever. I'll think about if I want to do anything more with that person, and it's just that maybe I get scared thinking about feeling more about that person...

"I have a friend at work, a man, who's a good friend. We have these discussions that will last for weeks—about everything. We'll be discussing—actually sometimes arguing about things, and I'll say something that he can't refute or figure out, so he has to agree with me—then a couple days later he'll be thinking about it, and he'll say, 'yeah, but...'

"I tend to have more male friends. I think I have more male friends than female friends. Still the female friends that I do have are tight. I have two best friends; we've been a threesome since I can remember—from the early days of high school. One lives in Chicago, and the other in Tempe, but we're still connected, though I don't see them as often as I'd like."

THE FUTURE

"Well, I'm studying biology, so I have learned we're looking at something dire. Our future is looking pretty sore, you know? We don't know when our life is going to end—our life on this earth. We don't know when it's going to happen—like when we're gonna run out of water. We don't know if our kids are going to see the world, if our grandkids are going to see a new world. But it's coming soon...we're killing this place off pretty fast, exponentially the problems are growing.

"The earth is not the only thing we're destroying, we're destroying ourselves as people—each other. It's just a very destructive society we've built up, full of greed and hate and anger...It's so vast—there's so much among people; I think it's going to be a very big thing when it all comes down—when everything is destroyed.

"I'm very interested in being an activist, but it seems there's nothing that can be done. I mean, one of my instructors at school stood there in front of 400 people, telling us there's nothing we can do! We can be as pleasant as we want about it, but we know that it's just a matter of time. Basically, he flat out told us that. And generally all of the instructors feel that way. Yikes! I guess you can prolong it as long as you can and that's pretty much what it comes to now. Even being an activist—I don't think you can stop it...but I think that we can try to prolong life.

"They talk about recycling...sure but in this country you have to stop before things become a product, which—afterward—you are going to recycle. You have to conserve, not make it, not buy it, not use it. I mean use recycled paper, that's a necessity, I mean you have to have paper—what I mean is wasting it in the first place. You just have to not make it...not buy it...you know what I'm saying?"

THE TURTLE CONNECTION

"The turtle thing is just a little bit of help I can do for existence, for our planet. Since it seems that humans are taking everything there is—including trees and animals and energy—and turning it into STUFF! More humans—more paper—more buildings—more computers. What they're taking down is all the biodiversity, taking away species that have been around for hundreds and millions or years. Like the turtles have been around—they're one of the oldest surviving creatures, I believe they've been around since the dinosaurs....

"So I go down to Mexico and I insure that humans don't take away their chance of surviving. We take their eggs, and by taking the eggs we protect the species—so the turtles can have a chance to go to the ocean and make more turtles.

"We walk along the beach at night and find either turtle tracks which lead to a nest (and then back to the ocean), or we'll find turtles in the process of nesting. We let her lay her eggs, then we take the eggs from her nest and put them in an artificial nest—which is just a hole in the sand built by us instead of by the turtle, only we protect it. We put the eggs in the hole and bury 'em like she does. We let them incubate and they crawl out of the sand on their own, but we also watch to make sure they make it all the way out to water. That way they have a chance.

"Because people down there poach the eggs. One nest of turtle eggs is worth about a week's salary...so it's a really big business in Mexico to steal the eggs and sell them. It's funny isn't it—? We save the turtles and hurt people who need to try and survive. There has to be a balance some place.

"Anyway, this is my way of helping a little bit. Plus, it's gorgeous down there! We do the walk at night, about a four-hour trek, so right about the time we're done the sun's coming up and we take a morning swim—and it's another gorgeous day in Mexico."

BEAUTY

"Yeah, I do consider myself to be beautiful, not necessarily in the physical sense, but I think I'm beautiful, and that's more of a heartfelt description. Because I don't want to hurt anybody —ever—in any situation. I would love for everyone to be happy and always smiling. I think happiness is contagious, and people should try to spread that. I think that appreciation and respect are big parts of it—I'm a big respect person. I tend to gravitate to people who have respect not only for nature and animals and trees and rocks—I think that type of respect is a lot easier to see than respect to people—but that respect does carry on towards people.

"I'm in a humanities class right

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now. We're studying Native Americans, and I really enjoy it. I know that balance and being one with earth—that I'm part of it. And everything is spiritual. Those are the basic things that white culture lost, if it ever had it in western civilization.

"In this humanities class I've learned a lot from the reading—which I guess is what you are supposed to learn from—but the biggest thing that I was just really disappointed in, and intrigued by, and interested in, and blown away by, is how much white people just completely took away everything from other people, in every culture we learned about. We killed them off, or tried to. I mean, before, I guess I was oblivious to the fact that we kicked the Indians out, we kicked the Mexicans out, too—we kicked everybody out. They were brown, and therefore inferior. Accepting... respecting—? There's no respect there, you know?"

TRUST

"I think I've always been told— by my parents or whoever—that I trust too much. I guess maybe that's because I would want everyone to trust me. Because I think I'm worthy of that trust, and I wish that other people were, because I just kinda believe that they are. And it makes it kinda hard, because sometimes I am too trusting.

"When you approached me I was suspicious, of course. I wanted to believe that you were a legitimate guy who just wanted to do an interview...but its hard, being a female, and you being a male...I don't know, if you had been a female, it would have been different, because I think it's kinda a sexual thing. You know, in way it can be threatening, or intimidating...

"I've trusted people, and then gotten hurt. I think everybody has...Yeah, but if you don't keep trusting you're worse off— maybe... because then you're closing yourself off from opportunities, or friendships or whatever...

"So, we've done the interview, and I've had the opportunity to trust you. I trust you now. It's good." (laughs) □

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■

Your Grandmother, the War Criminal

MAY-LEE CHAI

EVERYTHING BEGINS with a square. A perfect square. Remember this. Fold it in half and then half again so that you have a smaller square. Unfold. Be careful. Don't rush so. Half of everything we do depends upon unfolding things correctly. Now fold it diagonally into a triangle, and then in half again. Now you can begin. After all that.

You have a lot of patience. More than I did when I was your age. My mother wanted to teach me so many things—Spanish boxes and jumping frogs, Daimyo gentlemen and Samurai hats. But all I had patience for was the first one, the crane. And then it was too late. I moved into the white family's house. I don't remember their name, on Second and Amherst Avenue. *School-girl work* we called it. After school I cleaned and cooked and did the laundry for the lady, what was her name?, and the two children. They were a lot younger, I think. Than me. At least they acted that way, with all their dolls—glass heads and curly gold hair silky like feathers, and toy ships, such sharp edges, I remember. Always lying on the floor. I had to pick them up before the man came home. He liked a neat house, that's what the lady said. It was a good job for Japanese in those days. And who didn't need money?

I had my own room with a window level to the ground. I could watch legs and feet go by. I had my own bed. And seven books! Two were from school, math and a storybook, about horses, I think. Three from *Reader's Digest*, Book of the Month Club, the lady gave them to me, I wish I could remember her name, I'm senile, yes, I've felt it coming on for years. She gave them to me, said her husband didn't like sea stories. I remember pirates, storms, waves taller than ships, and the men who swore into the raging wind.

Two were from my mother—your *great* grandmother, that's right. She gave them to me before I left. Wrapped in colored paper with a giant pink department store bow. A cooking book and *Manners for Young Ladies*. Oh, no, these were wonderful. Mother had to be practical. And she was wise. But also a lovely girl, a lady, everyone said. Always dressed just right, appropriate you know, though we never had any money. She made her own clothes. Didn't need a pattern, just looked at the picture and knew. She taught me to sew. I sewed for the white family too, a little. Missing buttons, ripped hems mostly. But I made a jumper for the little girl once. Blue with yellow buttons down the front. They had a Singer, nearly new, it felt like ice cold butter, the smooth metal. But Mother sewed by hand. Perfectly. Didn't need a pattern, just looked at a picture in the magazines and knew.

She was the only Japanese in all the three stories of that department store, did you know? The only Japanese who ever worked in sales, not hauling things or packing. That's what a lady she looked like. Before she was pregnant with me, of course. She couldn't work then.

Don't hold your paper in your hands like that. The sweat of your palms will make it soft. Sag.

Now fold the first triangle in half, pushing the side edge to the crease, flatten it carefully. Now do the other side the same. Now you have the body. It's true, you're right, I've never seen a flowered crane before, but isn't the paper pretty? I always liked red.

It doesn't look like a real bird, that's true. But me, I've never seen a real crane so I don't know. Maybe in Japan they look like this. I always thought we were folding seagulls. There were so many in San Francisco. Even in the camp, after that. So beautiful. When we stepped off the bus, they were there, to greet us, swooping in the sky like paper kites. They opened their beaks and no sound came out, the wind was that strong. Stole their voices. The dust rose up in waves and the seagulls bobbed up and down, but one hung perfectly still, suspended right in front of me just as I stepped off the bus. Mother was angry, "Help me down, what are you staring at? Like a retarded child, staring at the sky. This is no time to daydream." The gulls flew away. But I can never forget the sight of them on our first day in Manzanar. So beautiful. A good sign I thought. I was twelve.

Oh, yes, Mother could talk then and hear. It was only later she became death. *Deaf* I mean, that's right. We stepped off the bus and don't you think some people stared? I heard voices, too, "*Ainoko*." "Half-breed," their American-born kids kindly translating as if I couldn't tell already. My hair was yellow brown then, like a toad, I heard the whispers, not quite whispers. I always wished I could have pretty black hair, like yours, but it's better now, half white, half gray. Better than yellow brown like a toad.

Mother used to praise my hair. Soft, she said. She liked the color. Blond-brown, she called it. American hair.

I never knew my father, your great-grandfather—You are one-eighth English-Welsh, did you

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know?—They separated before I was born. We used to have a picture of him, before I threw it away. He was standing in front of Pier Thirty-nine, behind him sea lions basked in the sun. I remember a felt hat on this thin man's head, a shadow on his face, just the tip of his nose catching the sun. He was tall like me.

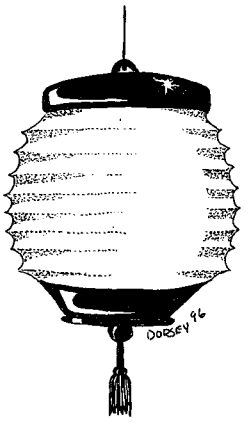
Where were we? Ah, now it's getting complicated. Take the sides of one face and fold them to the center line, bend the top point over and back, make a good crease. Then unfold. Pull the points of the triangle in opposite directions until it unfolds into a diamond. That's right. Smooth it down, careful, careful. Now do the other side this way.

It was just the two of us together in Manzanar. Aunt Fukiko was sent to Topaz. Uncle Hiro was in Montana. Just me and Mother stayed in California. But I felt like it was just me sometimes. Mother. Mother was preoccupied, no, she was *bon'yari*, there's no good English translation. Maybe you can say "vague."

The guards wanted us to speak only English of course but Mother insisted on Japanese. Not at first not at first. She went to see the FBI men when they came to interview us. Are you loyal to the United States of America? Would you fight for America? Have you ever heard anyone you know talk about America in an unfriendly manner? They asked everyone the same questions. The only men in suits and ties and hard leather shoes, they had names, Agent Brown, Agent Atkinson. We had numbers. Mother waited nodding, smiling, signing all the oaths of loyalty, then she began again each time, patient as the first. "My daughter is American. My husband is American. Just like you. A real American. Look at her, you can tell. Look at her." The FBI men explained about resident aliens and Japanese nationals and the war. Mother explained to the men at the horse track when we lived in the stables, five of us in one stall, big enough for one Palomino. She explained to the men at the camp, "American husband, American daughter," until her American voice caught in her throat and there was nothing left but Japanese. Her ears plugged with the wind and dust and she could hear only her family's voices from so long ago. They traveled across the ocean to visit with their little girl, she said. They hadn't talked since she'd left to join her big sister in America, too many girls for a poor family in a small village. All those secret conversations with ghosts came, again and again. How could she have talked to both them and me? And so soon I was alone. Except for my seagulls.

They came throughout the summer, unexpectedly. An empty sky and then in an instant, a flock, mewing, circling the barracks, bringing the sea on the tips of their wings. Home didn't seem so far away. I saved scraps, hamburger, buns dipped in milk. It was a war crime, to waste food, feed seagulls with government rations. So you see, I really was a war criminal. Imagine. Your grandmother! Ha.

I remember waiting for my gulls. We were folding laundry together, Mother and I, between the dusty blocks. The wind carried drops of water from the sheets and blouses flapping on the lines. *Mushi-atsukat-*



ta, Mother said. Humid, sticky hot, though it was cool, fall approaching. She was thinking of her childhood on Honshu. Talking to her parents there. I couldn't understand. Mother giggled to herself, twisted a strand of hair around her index finger. I folded our blouses, our underwear, balled my socks.

The wind slapped my hair against my face, stinging my lips. I pulled a strand from my mouth, watched the wind roll the dried sagebrush ahead of a wave of dust and litter, crashing like waves across the desert.

And then a rifle shot. I remember the feeling, in my heart, sharp sharp. The soldier boys in the tower shot at rabbits, at sagebrush, at dust devils. Not at us. Did we ever try to escape? Did we ever have a place to go? The shot echoed like a door slam, like anger, in your bones. I jumped to my feet, but before I could run to see what had been hit, Mother grabbed hold of my skirt.

Let go let go, I told her, tugged at the cloth, but her grip was firm.

I scanned the horizon, back and forth, what could I see? My head spinning, the wind in my ears, loud loud like the ocean, like an earthquake. Underwear and socks flapping on the line between blocks twelve and thirteen, dust in funnels dancing dancing in the wind, the shiny salty rocks, the dark mountains, the barracks, the laundry, the gun tower, the barbed-wire fence, someone's white longjohns flapping in the wind, the flat desert. My head was light, the light gathered into a haze before my eyes. I jumped, trying to break free, clutching at the air. I fell onto my knees in the dirt. It hurt. I remember. It hurt.

Mother gasped, "*Mi-te*!" Look! She pointed. A single white feather, tipped in red, lay on our basket of fresh laundry. Splash, a drop of red fell like a raindrop. Then another and another. I looked up, but the sky was empty. Even the blue was gone, the sun so bright, the sky was the color of steel. Then I saw the seagull, caught on a corner eave. Shot, its body a dark hole, its wings limp like seaweed. The wind tugged at the dead bird, but it was caught on a loose shingle, and only a few feathers took to the air. They fluttered over our heads like flower petals.

Mother. Mother flicked the feather out of the laundry basket, inspected her blouse for damage. She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, held the fabric

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up in the light, a veil brushing her face. The feather's spines remained lightly sketched in red. Mother spit on the fabric, dabbed at the stain with her handkerchief.

My gull, I thought. But of course it wasn't really mine.

I never watched for the gulls after that. And when winter came, the snow and the howling wind, the gulls left anyway. When they came back again with the summer, I was a big girl already, I didn't care. They were messy and noisy and scattered the garbage. That's what all the women said. Mother, too. In Japanese.

After the war, Mother went to live in the Heiwa Nursing Home in L.A., paid for by the Japanese, indemnity money, friendship money, something like that. She wasn't so old, not like me now, but she couldn't work then, not anymore. I met your grandfather while visiting Mother, did I ever tell you? We wrote letters—he would fold his into swans. I had that job in Salt Lake City, the city of seagulls. We couldn't see each other for months on end. Isn't it funny? I shouldn't cry. Not now. What's the matter with me?

But don't let me run on so. We're almost done. You really are so patient. Here, fold the bottom edges of the diamond towards the center, both sides. Then bend the left flap up and back. Now this is the hardest part. A pocket fold, see? This makes the neck. Take the tip and bend it back and forth, flatten, and refold it inside out. This is the head. Now pocket fold the other end up to make the tail. Now bend the wings down and pull. You're almost done. See the hole in the bottom, where all the edges of the paper meet, the beginnings and the ends? Blow here, one puff—quick—give your crane life. And we're finished. A fat crane, and red red red! Pretty, huh? The flowered paper was a good idea after all. Ha.

Now you won't forget what I've taught, will you? You'll try to remember, practice every day, won't you? Remember, remember, that's a good girl, don't forget. □

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Voices

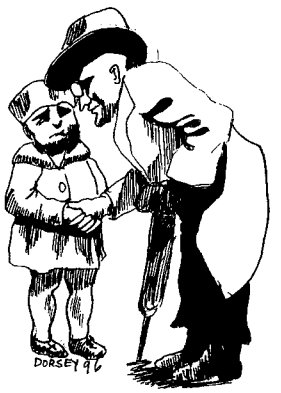
ROBERT L. KING

IN CELEBRATING its twentieth year at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, The Humana Festival of New American Plays presented a pair of one-act plays by John Patrick Shanley; a no-intermission pastiche on physics "conceived and directed" by Anne Bogart; four ten-minute plays by noted authors, and five full-length plays. If we overlook Shanley's sharp comic dialogues, and if the other plays are reliable evidence of the state of our theater, American playwrights are not creating characters with distinctive styles so much as they are—in the hot idiom of cultural studies—"giving them a voice." As a result, the motivating concepts both for the dramatists and their characters come out of an often thin reservoir of diction and attitudes. The play tends to be more a vehicle for displaying ideas than a place where beliefs are seen to be worked through, challenged and evaluated for their consequences.

In earlier plays with explicit meanings—Shaw and Brecht come to mind—characters have a moral stake in their messages and often must confront formidable intellectual adversaries, and old-fashioned conflict results. But even in the best plays of this year's Humana Festival, the ideas and language seemed like imported goods for the actors and audience to identify, exchange and finally put aside. The play became the plaything of the moment.

The premise of *One Flea Spare* by Naomi Wallace would alone call attention to her inventiveness. Four people are trapped in a London house during the plague of 1665. Two of them, Morse, a twelve-year-old girl, and Bunce, a sailor, are intruders; they have broken into the house of the other two main characters, Mr. and Mrs. Snelgrave, in a desperate attempt to escape the plague. All of Morse's family have died of it; the Snelgraves are distressed to have Morse and Bunce forceably confined with them for the mandatory twenty-eight days of the law.

In any production, actors can be restricted to the playing space before us; these characters, to Wallace's creative credit, are further confined metaphorically in an apparent refuge from a diseased world, a place where class and gender distinctions can be blurred by the threat of a common death. The Snelgraves cannot expel the servant and the girl, and as *One Flea Spare* evolves, power roles are reversed. In Act One, the middle-class Mr. Snelgrave allows Bunce to pose with his cane and shoes, a switch that demonstrates the artificial construction of social identity. Mrs. Snelgrave, fifty-three, offers Bunce gin in the middle of the night and we learn that at seventeen, two years married, she was burned trying to save a horse in a fire and that, as a result, her husband has not touched her since.



In Act Two, Morse, having learned knots from the sailor, ties Snelgrave in a chair after Bunce has pinned him there with his own phallic cane. Bunce punctures an orange on Snelgrave's finger and squeezes the juice into his own mouth. Later Mrs. Snelgrave, her eyes closed at Bunce's insistence, puts her finger in the wound he bears. Her husband dies bound in the chair, and as she suffers from the early stages of the plague, Mrs. Snelgave is killed by the child in an act of euthanasia. The significantly named Morse has a key-shaped mark on her body, so along with the master-slave theme, body as site and penetration, Wallace introduces the decoding of an inscription. Her initial dramatic conceit is strong enough to carry all this weight but the seventeenth-century situation is too explicitly a vehicle for twentieth-century critical notions that often seem to be used for their own current sake.

Wallace was not well served by the Louisville production. The girl playing Morse often did not articulate her lines clearly; the Snelgrave actor played him like a refugee from a Restoration comedy, a posturing would-be aristocrat.

One Flea Spare was mounted in the Bingham Theatre, a lovely new arena, but, with its several entrances, not the place to convey claustrophobic threat for audience or characters. I'm told that the earlier London production in the small, boxy Bush Theatre much more strongly conveyed a menacing tone and, despite my reservations, I'd see the play again in such a place.

Wallace is well past the threshhold of a promising career. Another of her plays has been staged both here and in England; yet another has been directed by Tony Kushner in a workshop production. A volume of her poetry, *To Dance a Stony Field*, approaches most of *One Flea Spare*'s subjects through what a cover commentary calls "diverse voices." When Wallace's ideas

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come out of a speaker's moral being, they have both credibility and moral depth. When they are "voiced," through penetrated oranges or inscribed figures, they stand at an academic distance from their audience.

IN HER NEW PLAY, the pseudonymous and prolific Jane Martin departs sharply from the dramatic forms of her discomforting *Keely and Du* and comic *Middle-Aged Guys*, both of which engage an audience's social conscience. *Jack and Jill* sketches the turbulent love between the title characters from their first meeting, to love, through break-up, to tentative reconciliation.

The play's title evokes the typical and, perhaps unconsciously, announces its limitations. The multiple scenes of *Jack and Jill* are framed by ones in a library. In the opening one, Jack comes on to Jill; in the closing one, she to him. In between they go through their love affair, and she becomes a doctor amid breezy, often funny and pointed dialogue on a half dozen topics of current interest, like a woman's independence. The problem is that they remain topics to provide the stuff of laughter while Martin has shown that she's capable of exploring subjects to uncover comic irony. When Jack unbuttons Jill's blouse, the audience can congratulate itself for catching the allusion to *King Lear*, but the emotional richness of the tragic original lingers as a repudiation of the fleeting laughter. A line from *Hamlet*, "A hit . . . A palpable hit," caps an exchange between the couple and raises the question of whether the play is being arch or trite. At the end, when Jill, M.D., asks Jack if she can go back to him, he responds with a firm "No," its quiet delivery intended to suggest deliberation. Then he changes to "Maybe," ending the play with what sounds like a profound ambiguity.

These significances are, however, willed by the playwright; they are overlaid on types too fragile to carry their presumed weight. When Jill says, "You're a complex damn comfort, Jack," the line's real merit lies in the jarring diction; it lives for a moment and fades quickly because it neither comes from nor is addressed to, a complex human being. *Jack and Jill* is like a two-person stand-up comedy, a set of attitudes. We gain no insights because no one's beliefs, including our own, are at risk.

THE ACTORS THEATRE commissioned novelist Elizabeth Dewberry's first play, *Flesh and Blood*, and mounted it with the careful, damn-the-cost attention to accurate detail that is the hallmark of its main stage sets. The four characters inhabit a "backyard, kitchen and den, somewhere in the present day suburban South." At the opening, Crystal is in her wedding dress, having backed out of marriage at the last minute. She ignores the insistent ringing of a telephone and will not explain herself until after intermission. Her mother, Dorris, soon her sister, Charlotte, and later her brother-in-law, Judd, will fill out the cast of four.

Well before the play starts, Dorris has done in her husband with some over-ripe potato salad, and she feared that Crystal's prospective husband was gay: "I thought he was too interested in the African violets." Similar one-liners compete with edgier jokes, as when one sister lays guilt on the other for miscarrying. Other troubles have also been glossed over because "families lie to protect each other." The father's off-stage death from sick salad tips off, but does not justify, the play's violent conclusion. Crystal has walked away from her wedding out of guilt for having had sex with Charlotte's husband only three weeks before.

When the truth comes out, Charlotte orders her sister to strip to the waist, to show the breasts that her husband had kissed. "We're sisters" precedes their apparent reconciliation but as they embrace, Charlotte stabs Crystal, no doubt fatally, with a large kitchen knife. She calls out "Mama, I need your help" at the curtain. As they have played out family squabbles, neither daughter has needed Dorris whose flustering concern has been

M. KASPER

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bothersome to them both. We have sensed, of course, that the sisters, like all children who resent intrusive parents in funny plays, need the family they complain about. Nonetheless, the final cry is neither poignant nor bleakly ironic because neither character nor play has depth enough to earn deep emotional or complex intellectual reactions.

JOAN ACKERMANN'S *The Batting Cage* begins with Wilson efficiently removing the plate from the light switch in the room of a Holiday Inn in Florida. She uses a battery powered screw driver and installs a dimmer. She hangs up ten identical Eddie Bauer black-knit shirts in one closet, one for each day of her stay. She flops across one of the two beds, a cross between a beached fish and a shapeless teddy bear. Her sister, Julianna, is her polar opposite in brightly colored dresses, and ready to clutter her days and Wilson's with the kind of activities that make *tourist* a dirty word for many of us. The women are in Florida to honor the wish of Wilson's dead twin, Morgan, who wanted her ashes scattered from the prow of a boat. The ashes, apparently lost in transit, arrive in Act Two with the women's mother, who also has instructions from Morgan on final readings and music to commemorate her.

The surviving sisters clash humorously throughout. Wilson's dream of a conquistador comes to stage life as the lights go down on Act One, and Julianna lowers her social sights to a room service waiter after being stood up by a more desirable man. Later, she receives roses in the room, apparently from him. The tone is light throughout until the concluding memorial, and in the final image, a light from above shines on an empty chair, set aside for the absent Morgan. The last line goes to Julianna who says to her sister, "Thank you for the roses." Wilson's thoughtfulness and the lighting bring the play to a harmonious close.

The play takes its title from Wilson's reconstruction of her escapist, liberating experience in a local batting cage. She stands on her bed and exuberantly re-enacts swinging at imaginary pitches. It's a set piece, an actor's monologue, that gives the inturning, grieving woman her voice. Like the spirit-laden light on the empty chair, the batting routine stands too much by itself to inform its dramatic surroundings.

THE ACTION OF *Chilean Holiday* by Guillermo Reyes takes place on the second anniversary of the coup that replaced Salvador Allende with General Pinochet. The national holiday brings together another stage family united and divided by love, with a significant difference from the other Louisville offerings in the play's political context. Family humor finally gives way to a tough resolution when Lautaro, an equestrian with legitimate Olympic hopes and a soldier with left leanings, willingly joins the secret police to assure his future and, so, separates himself from family and romantic love.

More overtly political was the Jimmy Breslin ten-minute play, *Contract with Jackie.* The title character is the first wife of "Newt," our own Speaker who, to our national pain, certainly has a distinctive voice. Indeed, Breslin uses many of Gingrich's own words to bludgeon him, as he negotiates a divorce with his cancerous wife in her hospital room. The Newt actor was not in control of his lines, so both pace and punch of the short piece suffered. Still, Breslin must have felt some of his misgivings vanish ("I'm so goddam insecure," he nearly shouted in the lobby beforehand) when two people were offended enough to walk out during his very brief satire.

If ten minutes were too long for Gingrich's supporters, one hour was overlong for the many who volunteered reactions to *Going, Going, Gone*, the Anne Bogart take on physics. The piece begins with a kind of caveat: "A story begins at the beginning but this story is about the universe and unfortunately, no data exist." So, all bets are off. We get Einstein's remark about God not playing dice, Frost's "Fire and

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Ice," a line from Poe, popular music ("Something's Gotta Give"), and crackling sound effects. Characters move in slow motion, freeze, walk backwards, dance frantically and pass through exits that warp time. In this theatrical universe, it's up to the audience to make connections —relativity reigns, doesn't it? For all the frenetic, disjointed elements in the piece, the old-fashioned concept of theme provided the hook. *Going, Going, Gone* is all about physics; it's like an illustrated lecture by a professor who wants to create interest in an esoteric subject for unwilling students in a required course.

THE INTERMISSION OF *Venus* at the Yale Repertory Theatre was filled by an actor delivering a lecture "on the various Physical Aspects of the Venus Hottentot," the subject of the latest play by Susan-Lori Parks. The title character was in fact exhibited in London early in the nineteenth century, and the attraction was indeed her large buttocks. Parks proceeded, then, from matters of fact with metaphoric potential for a wide range of questions on race, gender and display. Her director was Richard Fore-man, long noted for the kind of inventiveness that could bring Parks's bizarre subject to daring theatrical life. The result ran for over two hours although it could have been compressed into a skit of about twenty minutes without loss of a single insight. The actors wore head mikes, a bank of lights sometimes shone out into the house, a red bulb blinked on stage throughout, one of the other "human wonders" in the freak show that exploited Venus wore his genitals on his face, loud knocks and bangs punctuated the performance. The literally flashy technique distracted the audience out of thought; the self-indulgence of playwright and director both patronized and ignored the audience.

Parks aims for sweeping significance in a punning program note: "The past has a shape which we place behind us—our posteriors, our posterity—and we move onward from it." The reader is invited to play along with meanings too, yet when the play uses "maceration," a character steps forward, says, "Footnote number six," and defines the term. Over the audience's heads were intersecting strings which are Foreman's "scenic trademark," "magical" for him because they recall the first circus performance he saw as a boy. (The information comes

NANCE VAN WINCKEL

Professional Mourners

Their voices go up the notes and come down
perfectly. Because they are well-practiced:
the wrung hands, the humming. And the ache
of my feet for their shoes. To sob like that
for a living. Their gray knocks and black arrivals.

My father, shriveling through the drawn-out
twilight, sees them through his shut eyes.
How he'd love the way they eat and cry,
cry and eat. How he'd scoff at their bent heads
in rags, which he'd say only brought on this rain,
this thunder. The harder they weep, the deeper
the hole gold burns in their pockets. But their crying
hears mine, lets my high wail ascend inside theirs.

And O, the flawless piety of their feet
around the old man's body. And mine following.
I who loved him most have much to learn
of the great skills of grief. My fists pound my chest.
Three times, and three more. I want to do it
as it's done. For him, a man who drank
from the same bowl for forty years.

This keening must satisfy his still-hovering spirit,
must hold aloft what's so recently been evicted
so it might go on a little longer greedily sucking in
its last smells from the feast table.

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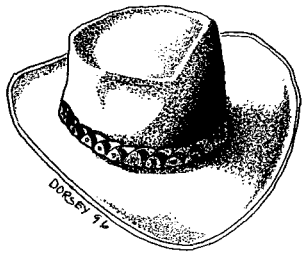
from a newspaper interview.) Parks herself is quoted as saying that she likes Foreman's blinking red light but doesn't know what it's supposed to mean. On the positive side, Venus collaborates in her own exploitation; the falsely sophisticated poke at her and measure her and think themselves intelligent.

Despite such telling moments, *Venus* is finally the triumph of dazzle over substance. Its verbal and dramatic images pop up and fall away in shifting, uninformed contexts. When Venus pleads for us to love her in the play's last words, with the exception of her measurements we know no more about her than when we first sat down. We've heard Parks's voice more clearly than hers. Like Foreman's appeals to our theatrical intelligence, the final one to our hearts is gratuitous. Self-satisfaction is the death of theater as communal.



AT CHICAGO'S Goodman Theatre, Charles Smith's *Black Star Line* reordered history without trying to revise it. Firmly in the Brechtian tradition, Smith began with Marcus Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement, introduced other relevant historical figures and juxtaposed mutually informing episodes. Like Brecht, Smith subordinates any concern for the inner lives of his characters to a presentation of their public selves. Their egos and their voices are far more important to him than his own. Twenty-one actors played twice as many roles in eighteen scenes covering twenty-four years; costumes and props went well beyond the required minimums. In concept and execution, the production was a tribute to the Goodman and, one hopes, to similarly committed theaters, lumped together under the label of regional. (Why not national? Is the West Coast on the Hudson?)

At its peak, Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association had two million members, a newspaper, and—as the start of a proposed shipping line and financial security—one boat, the Black Star. In his deliberate effort to dramatize the complexities of race in America, Smith sets black against black and Garvey's idealism against his own naïveté. Garvey, inappropriately dressed in a rumpled suit, enters a ballroom party in the opening scene. Other black men are in dinner jackets as are a couple of white businessmen. The women are in evening gowns of overstated 1920s elegance. The black politician trims racial convictions to suit majority beliefs; the entrepreneur, Madame C. J. Walker, has made her fortune on cosmetics for blacks, but her skin lighteners and hair straighteners question the very authenticity of her own people.

In Act Two, when Garvey finds skin lightener in his bride's effects, he hits her and in a typically short-sighted move, expels her from the UNIA although the office cannot run effectively without her. He orders the Black Star to continue sailing the Caribbean islands to raise black pride there while its perishable cargo is rotting. He goes to Mississippi to spread his gospel and to teach blacks literacy, but indirectly causes the racist killings of those he contacted. His hopes to resettle blacks are frustrated by the Liberian president's demand in French—he knows English all along—for two million dollars up front.

When W.E.B. DuBois receives Garvey in his office, a white aide is present and DuBois remains aloof from the man he called "a little, fat, black man; ugly, but with intelligent eyes and a big head." *Black Star Line* evens the score when DuBois is told, "You're nothing but a lawn jockey put on display by the white leaders of the NAACP." Other black voices are also heard with equal clarity and individuality. A black woman in Mississippi tells Garvey that she wants to go on his boat to see a country run by blacks: "Ah wants to be connected to something larger than me. Learn me, Mr. Garvey." Setting ideas against one another, Smith inevitably tends to make meanings overt; his dramatic form, however, leaves to the audience the work of sorting them out and accepting or rejecting them. For example, Smith presents but does not endorse Garvey's statement to the Grand Imperial Wizard of the KKK: "We want the exact same thing. You don't want the Negro around and we don't want to be around someplace where we're not wanted." There are, as Smith suggests in program notes, contemporary black leaders standing firmly in this tradition. Black Star Line transcends the history that it represents.

Smith sometimes labors audibly to set up his multiple scenes; in one, the exposition comes too late to be credible. His final dialogue is between a black and a Jew who has been forced out of Hoover's FBI for his race. It comes after Garvey's death. At first the two men, former adversaries, don't recognize each other, and the rosy note of reconciliation seems odd, almost falsely sentimental. The last line, however, while a cliché, is still true:

SCOTT: Wherever, we're going, we're going there together.

DAVIDSON: I never thought of it that way before.

SCOTT: We've got a long journey ahead of us.

IN A STRAIGHTFORWARD reading of *Ghosts* at the Hartford Stage, Mark Lamos, arguably our best director of Shakespeare, continued to work through the Ibsen canon. The most striking departure in the new translation by Gerry Bamman and Irene B. Berman was Regina's exit line: "I don't give a shit," an apt idiomatic comment from one rejected so completely by a society with rigid norms. The ghosts of the title serve as reminders of Ibsen's focus on our moral residue, the consequences of our decisions. His expository passages often fall heavy on our ears, but his characters generally speak of their past choices as they define their present troubled states. Ibsen knew that truly dramatic voices are delivered by characters in the midst of an inner moral crisis. □

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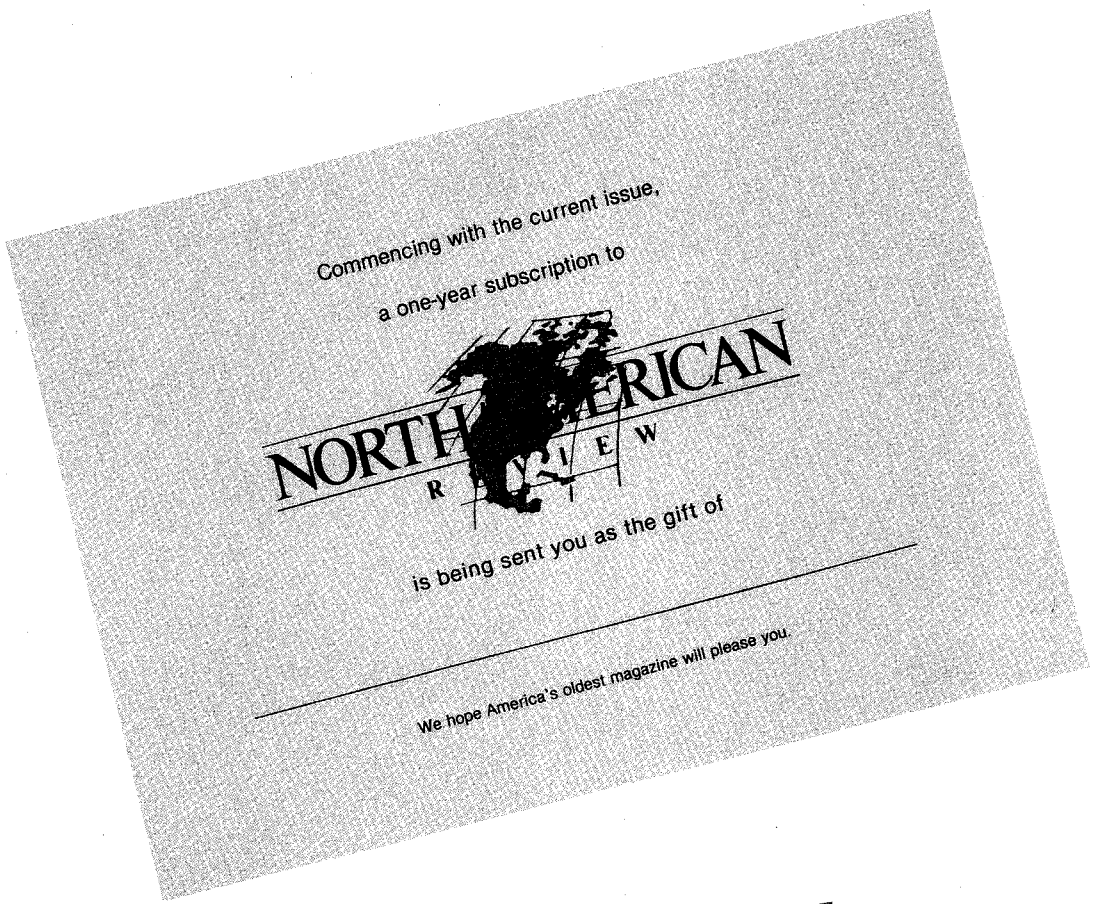
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